THE WORLDS IN-BETWEEN OF AN ASIAN AFRICAN WRITER: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF SELECTED NOVELS OF MG VASSANJI

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my original research and has not been presented for a degree in any other University or any other award.

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To the memory of my worthy grandparents:

David Wanjohi wa Muiré and Leiticia Muthoni Wanjohi

Zakayo wa Makokha and Margaret Namisi Makokha...

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ABSTRACT

MG Vassanji has written five novels tracing the movements of Asians from South Asia in the late nineteenth century to East Africa, and then from Africa to North America in the 1960s and 1970s. The community of Asians who came to East Africa before or at the time of British imperialism has now given rise to several other generations that in popular East African discourse are known simply as the "Asians." However, these so called Asians are actually Asian Africans, children of a bicontinental heritage as is evident in the Asian African Trust Heritage, a department of history at the National Museums of Kenya in Nairobi.

In East Africa, this community inhabits a middle area, both in colour and in status, between European whites and African blacks. The attempt to make sense out of inhabiting "worlds in-between" the Black and White has in fact become a congenital theme and leitmotif in almost all genres of writings of Asian Africans from East Africa. The imaginative writings of Asian African writers such as Peter Nazareth, Jagjit Singh, and Kuldip Sondhi who wrote about the Asian African experience in East Africa in the 1960s and early 1970s serve as prominent examples. This literary agenda persists in the oeuvre of the more contemporary Vassanji, especially in our two novels of focus, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. It is argued Vassanji's community, historically and socio-politically, was strictly never a part of the Black/White (post)coloniality but a community in-between the two,

the Black/White (post)coloniality but a community in-between the two, an interstitial community. In the present work, an exegesis of the two novels takes the form of a reading guided by postcolonial perspectives drawn from Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture.*

Being a conceptual study that relies entirely on library research, this work is guided by a comprehensive research methodology as discussed in chapter one. In chapter two the socio-historical and literary experiences of Asian Africans of East Africa have been reviewed as part of focussing the problematic of the study. This extra-literary information depicts the unique experiences of Asian Africans as an interstitial community in East Africa and provides useful perspectives for reading Vassanji's novels, *The Gunny Sack* and the *The Book of Secrets.* Chapter three argues that interstitiality is the central idea around which the plots of *The Gunny Sack* are built. Setting or fictional locations in this novel are viewed as part of Vassanji's strategy, underscoring Asian African interstitiality. *The Book of Secrets* is treated in chapter four. Nurmohammed Pipa, the quintessential Asian African, is the subject. Through him, his community's racial stereotyping is traced through historical lineage, and given both depth and meaning. Chapter five, the conclusion, gives a summary of the study. It also raises issues pertinent to future research in this area.

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EPIGRAPH

This is our home [Africa]. Our social identity rests on our bi-continental tradition. We are both Asian and African. We are Asian African.[β]

"Neti, neti" [μ]

[β] The words of the lawyer-poet Pheroze Nowrojee, Chairman of the Asian African Heritage Trust, a Department of the National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi. See his interview with Shashi Tharoor, 'We're all Kenyans here' http://www.shashitharoor.com/articles/hindu/kenyans.php.<Accessed 21st August 2005>

[μ] A saying from the holy scriptures, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* that translates into English as "not this, not that". Cf. Vassanji's *In-between World of Vikram Lall* (Doubleday: Toronto, 2003).

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUALISING THE WORLDS IN-BETWEEN: CAUSE AND COURSE OF THE STUDY

> [O]utside Eastern Africa, the Asian of East Africa were unknown. It was assumed outside that the issue was a Black and White one - a straight forward case of Africans versus Europeans. Asians in East Africa? Forming distinct, significant communities? The thought did not even cross the mind. Outside Africa, Asians were the invisible people of Eastern Africa—unnoticed, non-existent, irrelevant.
>
> Peter Nazareth[1]

Introduction

Most of the nation-states in Eastern and Southern Africa are testimonies of multiracialism. In East Africa – Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania – besides the White and Black races, there exists substantial populations of the "Brown" race made up of migrant communities of South Asian origin and peoples of Arabic heritage. An attempt to categorize, for academic purposes, East Africans of Asiatic heritage, especially South Asian heritage, has given rise to the name "Asian Africans."[2] Neither indigenous Asians nor indigenous Africans, the Asian African community in East Africa is the hybrid product of cultural contact between Asia and Africa over many centuries.

In this study, we should understand "Asian Africans" as descendants of a racially-distinct, migrant community of South Asian heritage that settled in East Africa long before and during twentieth-century European colonisation of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Asian African, as a descriptive label, is used to distinguish the descendants of pre-independence Asian settlers in East Africa from a fresh wave of contemporary "investor Asians."[3] The latter are part of the transnational, migrating labour/capital,

characteristic of the present stage of globalisation, which made [and continue to make] their maiden settlements in East Africa in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

As a racially distinct socio-cultural community in Eastern Africa, Asian Africans have like many other diasporic communities across the world had a complex past when it comes to matters of identity. An analysis of their situation has focussed on the experience of the community as a set of problems often referred to as the "Asian/Indian Question."[4] These problems include *inter alia* political emasculation, socio-racial victimisation, social demarcation and cultural marginalisation. The problems take place within a complex matrix of colonially-instigated ideas, attitudes, cultures, prejudices and philosophies which stress or rationalize racialised cultural difference. It is necessary to problematise cultural difference, indeed race with regards to Asian Africans in East African literary scholarship.

In the nascent stages of East Africa's post-independence literary experience, Ngugi did point out openly that race is perhaps the most influential dynamic in East Africa's literary imagination.[5] His contemporary, Taban Lo Liyong has gone a step farther to declare that East Africa is distinguished from other literary regions of the continent due to its three-tier racial society. This society comprises of indigenous Africa (Blacks), Caucasoid (Whites) and Asiatic (Browns) roots.[6] Taban argues that these three important aesthetic roots anchor contemporary East African literary traditions: the Negroid, Caucasoid, and Asiatic cultural roots. The indigenous African roots, as is evident in the writings of Ngugi, and the Caucasoid roots evident in the writings of Elspeth Huxley, are the most widely acknowledged aspects of East African literature. The Asiatic roots of

Asian Africans such as MG Vassanji constitute the missing piece to the mosaic of East African literature.

Strictly speaking, Asian Africans in East Africa, as a cultural community were never *really* colonisers or the colonised in the distinct manner definitive of Blacks and Whites respectively. They are, and have been even in the colonial dispensation, an interstitial migrant community – a grey-area in a tripartite racial society. From this in-between location, writing, shaped as it is by identity politics and other realities, is a challenging exercise to many an Asian African writer.

An extensive review of postcolonial literature reveals that Asian African writers use Literature as a mode of representation through which the (hi)story, cultural autonomy and need to resurrect colonially-suppressed identities of the writers' community can be articulated. The novels of M. G. Vassanji's, the sociological works of Mahmood Mamdani, the poetry of Jagjit Singh, the plays of Kuldip Sondhi, the biographies of Zarina Patel or the short-stories and autobiography of Rasna Warah for example are important sites of engagement in postcolonial studies. The common denominator of all these diverse writings is that they have sought to map, engage, interpret and demystify the "in-betweeness" of the Asian African community in East Africa.

The quest for identity has in fact become a congenital art form in all genres of writings of Asian Africans. Writing from the problematic location identified in Nazareth's epigraph compels these authors to confront issues of interstitial identity. The position of Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji, within this general picture is singular. The writer was born in racially stratified,

colonial Kenya, to parents of South Asian heritage, belonging to the minority Islamic sect of Khoja Ishmailia.

In 1959, he relocated with his family to Tanzania [then Tanganyika]. Later in 1968 he joined the University College at Nairobi [later University of Nairobi], before leaving for the United States for nearly a decade of higher education in 1969. Finally, in 1978, Vassanji settled down in multicultural Canada where he now extensively and intensively writes internationally acclaimed lifestories of the experiences of Asian Africans of East Africa.[7] How, therefore, can one read Vassanji?

From in-between the many worlds that he occupies and writes about, Vassanji has increasingly been identified as a vocal representative of the ambivalent and transcultural experience of Asian Africans as a cultural community in post-colonial East Africa.[8] Realising the complex nature and facets of the largely untold stories of his community, he advocates that Asian Africans "need to saturate the market with stories about our lives since every problem can be traced to how *people see themselves*. If we don't write about ourselves, we might as well consider ourselves buried."[9]

This open advocacy underscores his commitment and agency as a postcolonial writer, whom as Bhabha notes is charged with the responsibility of "interven[ing] in those ideological discourses...that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples.[10] Vassanji's own personal (hi)story as an Asian African (in)forms aspects of his novels. It is the influence of his experience on certain formal aspects of two of his earliest novels, *The Gunny Sack and the Book of Secrets* that is the subject of this thesis.

1.2 DEFINITION OF TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Ambivalence – The term originally developed in psychoanalysis to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite too. Bhabha has adapted the term into postcolonial theory to describe the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterises the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. The term is strictly employed in this work, to mean the desire for both an alien and native world, by diasporic peoples such as the Asian Africans of East Africa.

Colonialist ideology - The belief that the colonising force is culturally superior to that of its colonised subject. "Ideology" by itself is a term popularly used in literary criticism by Marxist critics such as Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton and Emmanuel Ngara to mean the content or manner of thinking characteristic of an individual (e.g. Vassanji), group (e.g. colonialists) or culture [e.g. Asian Africans].

Colonial subject - All colonised peoples under European imperialism, in East Africa, this means both Asian Africans and indigenous Africans.

Contrapuntal reading - A strategy of reading texts popularised by the late Edward Said. He suggests that in reading a text one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. In fact, according to Said, postcolonial readers must connect the structures of a narrative in a given text to the ideas, concepts and experiences from which it draws support.

Cultural difference - The belief in racial superiority, inferiority and purity based on the conviction that moral and intellectual characteristics, just like physical characteristics, are biological properties

Diaspora - A location perceived as homeland and borderland at the same time by a cultural community but is separate from an original homeland where the community descended. For instance, East Africa is a diasporia for the Asian African peoples.

In-Betweeness/Interstitiality - A consciousness that arises in Asian African subjects that is characterised by a division between two antagonistic cultures while attempting to maintain one's own which is actually neither of the contesting two, but a third one altogether

Manicheanism – This is a term used in the field of post-colonial studies for the binary structure of imperial ideology.

Post-colonial Reading – A critical approach to a literary text that comprises of a subversive reading and re-reading mostly applied to works emanating from European colonising forces (but may be applied to works by the colonised).

Racialism - The belief in racial superiority, inferiority, and purity based on the conviction that moral and intellectual characteristics, just like physical characteristics, are biological properties that differentiate race.

Subjectification – The formation of individual identity through an analysis of the determining structures by and through which a given self-image is articulated. This self-image, if perceived in its generic and typical features usually says something, if not everything about the

being of the community from which the self-image draws its socialization.

Subject-positions - The socio-economic, political, religious and cultural niche assigned to different Selfs by historical forces in Vassanji's narratives

Unhomeliness – This is a psychological experience of not feeling at home even in one's home because one is not at home in one-self. It is bred by a cultural identity crisis brought about by in-betweeness of many subjects of communities that exist as diaspora. E.g. The Asian Africans of Vassanji's texts such as Nurmohamed Pipa, the African Americans of Richard Wright's texts such as Bigger Thomas and the Asian Caribbeans of V.S. Naipaul's novels such Mr. Biswas.

1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this review of literature, we offer non-exhaustive but critical insights, which map the discursive trajectory through which the present study finds its place among other previous but pertinent works. Many scholars across the globe and across various disciplines have contributed to the ongoing postcolonial discourse. Interestingly, Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhiku Parekh in their illuminating essay, "Shifting Imaginaries: Decolonisation, Internal Colonization, Post-coloniality" point out that postcolonial discourse first focused on the question of representation.[11]

The two scholars observe that the key areas of engagement with issues of cultural representation within postcolonial studies were anthropology and literature. They go ahead to point out that at the heart of these studies lies an enduring interest in the role of (post)colonial literary works. In the introductory section of this chapter, we argue that M. G. Vassanji's selected novels read as modes of representing the diasporic experience of Asian Africans of East Africa can supply us with fresh insights into the nature of the cultural identity of this community. Other scholars have, indeed pointed out that there is a link between postcolonial literary representation and questions of identity.

Madan Sarup, for instance, in his important book, *Identity, Culture in the Postmodern World* offers a scrupulous discussion of amongst other issues, the link mentioned above.[12] Writing on identity and narratives he views the quest for cultural identity in the postcolonial worlds as a deliberate and purposeful construction of our life-stories. This means that fiction or novels such as Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*

are both fictional stories and postcolonial projects that narrativise the experiences of given nations over a certain time and in a certain space. His view that every identity has a history becomes crucial to our understanding because of the way it explains why Vassanji structurally and thematically draws from the personal, communal and national histories of his people in the selected novels. Sarup is convinced that postcolonial narratives are actually the constructions of our life histories as we attempt to negotiate or carve for ourselves a sense of being; a sense of who we are.

His point concerning the terms people use to describe themselves is of value to this study. Sarup calls this process, "labeling" and goes on to add that "people always attach certain labels to others, and labels often (but not always) begin to have an effect."[13] We maintain that apart from Vassanji's novels being modes of representing the Asian African cultural identity through the life-stories of his fictional subjects, they also serve another purpose; that of labeling. When read as (hi)stories of Asian Africans of East Africa, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* inform their readers of what it means being an Asian African; an inbetween people in a diasporic land.

It is worth noting that the decision to label, "Africans of Indian descent" as Asian Africans needs explanation. Why not, for instance must we reconsider the popular misnomers, "Kenyan Indians" or simply "Indians?" This study is a conscious attempt to negotiate carefully away from the misconception [or mislabeling] that obscures an accurate conceptualization of this community in East Africa. Sarup rightly argues that to label a people is not only to represent those people but also to define them. As Nazareth in the epigraph states, Asian Africans in East Africa are

an "invisible community" because of how they are popularly labeled, represented and defined in East Africa.

It is not epistemologically accurate to say that Vassanji is an *Indian* from East Africa, at least in the descriptive sense of that label. He is not an Indian in terms of his cultural identity for the obvious reason that Indians are from India. Using his land of birth, Vassanji could more accurately be labeled as an *African* of Indian ancestry, or an Asian African. Such a labeling will go a long way to point to his interstitial sense of being and the interstitial nature of his community in East Africa. It will also go a long way to explain, in his own words why many people, outside East Africa, find it difficult to come to terms with his African origins. In an interview with this researcher Vassanji says:

> I do not like academic conferences [on African Writers]; and I find that most of these are organized by Europeans and Americans; to them (this is my feeling) an Asian just doesn't belong to the Africa they have conjured up; they have their money and positions and their coteries of Africans. On the other hand, I go to my Dar or Nairobi, identify with the landscape, be it dry grass or a hut, enjoy speaking Kiswahili or simply drinking chai in a banda and listening to banter; and no one there, especially in Dar, even asks me where I come from. And when I speak Kiswahili, the manner of my speech identifies me immediately as someone of the land. What need do I have of a conference?[14]

Vassanji seems to imply that the labeling of a writer does affect how such a writer is perceived and read. It is by approaching him as an African of Asian ancestry that we can access the most accurate interpretations of what he is really out to do and say in such novels as *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*.

If one were to read Vassanji's novels as postcolonial Indian novels as of Raja Rao, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai or Khushwant Singh, it might provide a general(ised) view of what it means to be an Indian in the post-

colonial world. Such a reading might fail to give the specific perspective of what it means to be an "Indian" in the postcolonial, *African* world today. The argument here is that labels for identifying people are usually connected to the locations of those people's societies. "African American" implies people living or born and raised in America although of African descent. Likewise, "Asian African" implies people living or born and raised in Africa although of Asian descent.

Postcolonial critics such as Edward Said have also been fascinated by why and how people label others [or themselves]. In his influential book *Orientalism,* he supplies a classic case of that line of thought.[15] One of his many well argued theses is that those representations (or the process of labelling) as well as ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, their configurations of power, also being studied. To believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination is to be disingeneous.[16] He goes on to add, "each age and society re-creates its 'others.' Far from being a static thing, the categories of 'self' or of 'other' are a process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies."[17] The fact that there are two colonial Others in East Africa makes the case even more complex.[18] Indeed, literary representation is a politicised and contestable domain of beingness.

To create our images, we must create oppositional images that reflectively and reflexively rationalise our own sense of being. This raises certain questions. Are the Asian Africans conjured as the Other by both the Colonial White mind ala Huxley and the Postcolonial Black mind ala Ngugi simply creative aspects of their works? Could it be that the images of Asian Africans in White and Black literature from East Africa are nuanced with a

polemical and political dimension? These are the questions that form the basis of our extensive and illustrated discussions in Chapter 2.

Closer home in Kenya, scholars such as H. R. Lung'aho and Mbugua wa Mungai have recently contributed to the self/Other interplay of postcolonial discourse which as I have argued is based on a Manichean logic which Vassanji and Bhabha disavow.[19] Their useful studies in Self and Othering within a South African literary context demonstrate how Black Africans and Whites, as tropological entities in certain African societies raise, cause and deal with moral issues grounded on racism. Their focus, as Bhabha's, is on the works of South Africa's Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer. Much as Lung'aho and Wa Mungai lend important insights into what Said calls the authority of 'Orientalism' in Africa, their studies fail to look at the Asiatic factor which is a crucial and integral part of the South African apartheid society that they treat.

Other studies and other more within the East African literary tradition such as Micere Mugo's *Visions of Africa*, Eddah Gachukia's 'Cultural Conflict in East African Literature' and Chris Wanjala's *For Home and Freedom* participate in a postcolonial projects critiques of racial difference and polarize the issues of East African cultural (read racial) identity into a Manichean Black-White axis which silences the Brown races and communities of Eastern.[20] Yet, from our forgoing arguments, the three important studies occlude the presence of the Brown component that pluralises East African racial identity.

It is important to also pay attention to the writings of Brown writers within East African literary discourse. This concern arises from Said's observation that "the relationship between Selves and Others is a

relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."[21] In this case, to remain silent is to be emasculated or as Salim, the Asian African narrator of V. S. Naipual's *A Bend in the River* seems to imply, the world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it. This is because the Asian African is an ethnic feature of the African landscape, geo-politically and historically as well. For as Salim goes on to add of the Asian African:

> Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries. But we came from the east coast, and that made the difference. The coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back. Many miles of scrub or desert separated us from the up-country people; we looked east to the lands, with which we traded— Arabia, India, Persia. These were also the lands of our ancestors. But we could no longer say that we were Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa.[22]

In spite of Salim's revelation of the presence of the Asian Africans in East Africa over many centuries, the exclusive Black/White Othering remains a popular methodological instrument for anatomising the imperial program in East Africa's literary criticism or postcolonial discourses. Yet, we must point out that in itself, Othering has implicit flaw, in fact it is a self-destructive device in colonial discourse analysis.

The main reason for this self-destruction lies in the view that the Other is a site of desire as of repudiation—well demonstrated in Andrew Milner's chapter on cultural theory towards 2000 in *Contemporary Cultural Theory*.[23] This means that works such as Wanjala's *For Home and Freedom* while repudiating the authority of colonialist literature in East Africa are reticent about the region's ambiguous postcolonial voice. This reticence indicates a certain measure of desire for the colonialist authority even if

Wanjala supplies a systematic and impressive critique of what Abdul JanMohamed has called the "politics of literary generation" in East Africa. [24]

Ultimately, in our view, one of the most uncompromising arguments lodged against the Manichean aesthetics of the preliminary post-colonial moment in African letters, is that by Kwame Anthony Appiah. He says:

> Africa's postcolonial novelists, novelists anxious to escape neocolonialism, are no longer committed to the nation. ...Postcolonialism has become, I think, a condition of pessimism... Postcoloniality is *after* all this: and its *post-,* like that of postmodernism, is also a post that challenges legitimating narratives...If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous *echt*-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots). And there is a clear sense in some postcolonial writings that the postulation of a unitary Africa over against a monolithic West—the binarism of Self and Other—is the last of the shibboleths of the modernizers that we must learn to live without.[25]

This citation serves as a thought provoking disavowal of the Manichean views of East African literature where White Self has been traditionally seen as engaged in a conflictual intercourse with its Black Other or vice-versa. Consequently, this study insists on the inclusion of the Asian African in the racial interpretation of East African literature. It is interesting to find out how a postcolonial critic can engage this third, interstitial voice, and also how it resists such an engagement.

The practical problem in a Self/Other relationship appears to lie in the organization around the idea that it is possible to have a spillage, repulsion or attraction of the two polarities towards each other. In which case, indigenous African writers may be seen as desiring or mimicking the oppressive White, or vice versa. This is not a novel observation. As a matter of fact, in the discourse of the self/other relationship, negotiations can be envisaged in which the other is granted limited recognition—as is the case

with Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye—that forms the basis of a mediation for the possibility of integration

The methodology going beyond the Manichean/Othering reading, to include Vassanji may lie in Said's famous "contrapuntal reading." Sarup has captured this reading strategy thus, "Said's contrapuntal reading suggests that in reading a text one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. Moreover, we must connect the structures of a narrative to the ideas, concepts and experiences from which it draws support."[26]

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said offers a contrapuntal method of global cultural analysis, in which texts and contexts are seen as feeding each other.[27] Indeed Said has argued that imperialism and culture are associated with affirmation of the location or physical contexts as well as ideology or mental contexts of the imperial project. He says "We have been so used to thinking about temporality that we often overlook the function of space, geography and location."[28]

In Said's view, territory or space is one of the arenas where cultural conflict plays itself. In the imperial project, that space happened to be the minds and lands of the colonised people. Arguing on these lines, Said proposes that if the colonial mind was based on a dualistic split of the world into Self/Other existence, then it is natural that even cultural economy should be theorised on that plane. However, in our view, a third space, an interstitial space is also an integral part of the East African colonial equation. As such, we thus shift our critical focus away from the intricacies and intrigues of Manichean politics in postcolonial literary debates, especially in East Africa, to the possibilities of a non-Manichean worldview.

We conceptualise this interstitial space as that diaspora that is East Africa, seen from the viewpoint of the Asian African community.

This is because cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor dualistic in the relation of Self and Other; there is always the margins or the grey areas that destabilize simplistic conceptualisations of the plural environment that is the post-colonial world. For instance, there is textual evidence that the awareness of being neither one nor another in terms of cultural identity, a common phenomenon for Asian Africans of East Africa can be traced in Rasna Warah's introductory words in the thought-provoking autobiography, "I researched and wrote *Triple Heritage* out of anger and grief. Anger at the fact that despite being a fourth generation immigrant to Kenya, my status lay somewhere *between* citizen and refugee, *of one not quite belonging anywhere.*"[29] If we take Warah as a metonym of her community, the pervasive sense of "in-betweeness" or interstitiality in her book may [f]actually be a distinctive and enduring theme of the cultural and self identities of Asian Africans, at least of writers from the community as articulate members.[30]

Postcolonial theorists are increasingly fascinated by the interstitial nature of diasporic or migrant identities—such as that of Asian Africans—in our postcolonial/postmodern world. Homi K. Bhabha arguably stands at the fore of a wide range of these theorists. Beside him stand other authorities such as Abdul R. JanMohamed, Llyod Davis, Partha Chaterjee, Kwame Anthony Appiah, V. Y. Mudimbe and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to mention but a few established names in the expanding intellectual project popularly known as postcolonial theory.[31]

At the forefront of the mentioned scholars stands Bhabha who in *The Location of Culture* foregrounds interstitial peoples in the postcolonies, by privileging their specific racial and national identity. His neologistic critical vocabulary such as "diasporic identities," "unhomeliness," "cultural ambivalence," "re-membering" and "interstitiality," insistently remind other postcolonial theorists, of the ambivalence that pervades colonial and postcolonial societies. *Location of Culture* is considered an important text in any theoretical engagement with issues of postcolonial racial or national identities.

Tim Woods in his review of the book in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* entitled, *On The Location of Culture (1994)* says:

> This is in every respect a significant book, which will have a profound impact upon the manner in which cultural practices are conceived. In *a book which must rate as one of the principal texts of recent post-colonial theory,* Homi Bhabha establishes the intellectual coherency and conceptual necessity for such a project. Always entertaining, witty and astute, Bhabha brings together a series of seminal and luminous essays in skilful and effortless explorations of a diverse variety of writers and issues.[32] [Emphasis added]

Indeed, the idea of in-between identities or entities is one that has for sometime fascinated leading postcolonial intellectuals and theorists, most notably Bhabha himself. He has argued persistently that the intervention of the "in-between" or Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys the mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an oppositional code that facilitates an exclusive exchange and transfer between two diametrically opposed discursive polarities, commonly known as the Centre and its margins.

In Bhabha's view, such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People...we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space –that carries the burden of meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national and anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.[33]

His finest crystallisation and rumination on the nature of the in-between location of cultures in the post-colonial world is evident all along in all the essays within the book, *The Location of Culture*. In these essays, Bhabha's arguments shift postcolonial reflections from preoccupations with Manichaeism to the authority of the ambivalence inherent in emergent and established interstitial identities such as Vassanji's. It is this (pre)occupation with the interstice as a location of culture that justifies looking at Vassanji through Bhabha's prism and makes Sarup to say of the former:

> It seems to me that he is interested in living and theorizing in the interstices, in and between cultures. In his view, these intervening spaces have a strategic importance. Working on the borderlines, he is very aware of the cultural incommensurability that has to be negotiated. He has drawn attention to hybridization, the process whereby two cultures retain their distinct characteristics and yet form something new. He has also suggested that when we think of power-knowledge we should also consider the role of anxiety. Anxiety can be a sign of danger, but it can also be a sign that something new is emerging.[34]

Bhabha indeed identifies one such "in-between" or Third Space as the Diaspora. He talks of the Diaspora as an interstitial space between the national centres and the metropolitan centres inhabited by the minorities,

ethnic, sexual, political and racial among others. Moreover, he argues that being in the Diaspora is being in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. We have already paraded such complex figures from the Asian African community in the case of Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle* and Vassanji himself. We will review shortly a number of scholarly works that have also chosen to look at East Africa as a Diaspora where the Asian African community tries through the works of writers like Vassanji to define itself.

The argument so far has focussed on Manichaeism and the problem of Othering with the intention to establish a critical research space requisite to an authoritative placement of the Asian African literatures in what Bhabha calls "a postcolonial perspective." [35] The foregoing has therefore supplied us with crucial contexts through which we can now zero in on specific scholars who have in one way or another engaged with the interstitial politics of Asian Africans in general and Vassanji's literary practice in particular. We now proceed with Oluoch-Olunya's submission that creative texts themselves are clearly more than just narrative; they are also products of complex epistemological contexts.[36]

Presenting a paper in 1998 on the inauguration of the Asian African Heritage Trust in Nairobi, the respected social anthropologist, Sultan Somjee proposed that the Asian [African] Question could be summarized in the 1990s as being concerned with: "Who are you?" and "Why are you here?" [37] He further argued that it is important for descendants of pioneer Indian settlers in East Africa to possess a strong sense of, and to be proud of their Asian African identity. Somjee's clarion call came in the wake of a conscious

endeavour by Asian Africans, especially from Kenya to engage with the fact that they are a diasporic community that is in Africa to stay.

There have been a number of scholarly works on the Asian Africans in East Africa. But its important to note that these works have mostly been critical historical accounts of the genesis and genealogy of this community as migrant minority segment occupying an interstitial location of sorts in East Africa. Historians of Asian African history in East Africa such as Lawrence Hollingsworth, Mahmood Mamdani, J. S. Mangat, Dharam Pal Ghai and Yash Pal Ghai, Shanti Pandit, Agehenanda Bharati, Donald Rothschild, E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, Daniel Don Nanjira, Robert Gregory, Zarina Patel and Dana April Seidenberg, have written on various aspects of the lives of the Asians in East Africa. [38]

Their bid to remember the Asian African past as a way of re-membering it to the dominant historical account of national and regional histories in the postcolonial dispensation is timely. However, as Bhabha points out, remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense to the trauma of the present.[39] Such a painful exercise can never fully be sustained without the collective sense of responsibility from all the agents interested in the revisionist and archival projects. Apart from historians, as Nedeverdeen and Parekh pointed out at the beginning of this literature review, anthropologists such as Somjee and writers such as Vassanji have also been active agents in the remembering and re-membering projects within recent Asian African experience.

Vassanji always describes his literary practice as an archival venture which aims to tell and store the (hi)stories of the Asian African peoples of

East Africa.[55] In his various interviews, like the one with Ray Deonandan, Vassanji has underscored this issue in light of marginality as a descriptive condition of his Asian African community. He says, "I tell stories about marginalized people. All writers do, whether the people in question be a family of Jews in New York or a farming community in Saskatchewan...I've had people who've moved from Nova Scotia to Toronto tell me that they can appreciate my stories because it speaks to them of their experience. Again its one of marginalization."[40]

Vassanji is driven by the desire to offer an alternative view of his community in all its ambivalence. Neloufer De Mel notes Vassanji's narrative intervention on the origins of Asian Africans and their migrant identity in the challenging location that is East Africa.[41] De Mel posits further that Vassanji's work is a dynamic site which lays bear the paradoxes, incompatibilities and ambivalences that are the central paradigms of migrant experience and discourse...The value of Vassanji's works lies precisely in the projections of how such hybridity, if at all, can never comprise an equal mixing of the disparate strands. For identity is a site of negotiation that depends on the exigencies of situation, is always anchored to political, economic and cultural hegemony and comes most unstuck at moments of crisis.[42] It is for this crucial reason that we situate our study within a discussion of Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* that De Mel also studies in her chapter.

A number of scholars from East Africa have commented on the East African postcolonial literary experience in East Africa with specific attention on Asian African writings. These scholars include Dan Ojwang of the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, Peter Tirop Simatei of Moi

University in Eldoret, Kenya and Danson Kahyana at Makerere University in Uganda. They have given insightful discussions of Asian African literatures from East Africa. Before we review their informative work, let us first appreciate one "early" commentator on the "Asian African Question" in East Africa.

Traces of scholarly interest in the literary worlds of Asian Africans can be found in Nyambura Mpesha's doctoral research, a brilliant rumination on the genesis and genealogy of children's literature in Tanzania. In a subsection entitled, 'Encounter with Asian Literature' Mpesha notes:

> East Africa's contact with Asia, *especially Arabia and India is longer than her contact with Europe and interaction in this area of literature is also deeper.* An obvious exploration of the similarities between Asian and African stories springs from the fact that European colonisers capitalised on some of the common aspects in their civilising and educating missions in Africa...[43][Emphasis Added]

Mpesha's study is revealing especially when approached from a utilitarian perspective. That is, she does not just stop at making the observation of the synergies that exist between East Africa and other littoral lands on the Indian Ocean; notably India and Arabia.

She goes on to assert what in her view is the central function of Asian African literature in East Africa—to raise levels of awareness of these community and others around them. In her words she says:

> For the Tanzanian child [Asian African Literature] gives insights into the religion and culture of the Indian people. Their relevance of such a book is not just to make him worldly wise but to make him to get to know Indians better. Moreover there are a good number of Indians who form part of the Tanzanian nation and would have special interest in the [literature][44]

This view can help us recognise that Asian African literature such as Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* are indeed important modes of representation as Nederveen and Parekh pointed out. Through the

two novels we can obtain insights "into the culture of the "Indian" people." It is for this reason that Vassanji's anti-hero, Vikram Lall begins his engrossing tale thus:

> My name is Vikram Lall. I have the distinction of having been numbered one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning...I simply crave to tell my story...I have even come upon a small revelation—and as I proceed daily to recall and reflect, and lay out on page, it is with an increasing conviction of its truth, that if more of us told our stories to each other, where I come from [East Africa], we would be a far happier and less nervous people.[45]

Mpesha's fleeting interest in Asian African literature finds its precursors in earlier views made by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Peter Nazareth, Charles Sarvan and later Jameela Siddiqi.[46] All these scholars have been troubled by the place of the Asian African writer and writings within East Africa. They seem to find a consensus in the views of Taban Lo Liyong that Asian Africans are indeed a cultural root of East Africa's cultural experience.[47] In other words, much as they give conflictual and sometimes consensual personal opinions, the general agreement appears to be that East African postcoloniality cannot be conceived minus its Asian African heritage, just as the American culture cannot be conceived without its African component.

After Mpesha, came the latter-day scholars, Kahyana, Simatei and Ojwang who have actually commented on Asian African writings as part of their conference participations as graduate students. It is argued elsewhere that the contribution of these scholars is important because it gives an insight into recent developments in postcolonial studies of East African literature.[48] This concern in the works of Asian African writers as a postcolonial constituency within African literary traditions can also be

traced in the literary projects of various other critics who remain as of now unknown to this researcher.

Kahyana, in his paper, 'Ugandan Asians, Identity and the Literacy Medium,' addresses three important concerns.[49] He is concerned with firstly, how do indigenous Africans in Uganda view Ugandans of Asian origin? Secondly, how is these intra-national chaos or cohesion manifested in Ugandan poetry and fiction? Lastly, he investigates whether Ugandans of Asian origin fully identify themselves as Ugandans, and whether they conduct themselves as such politically, economically, and socially. In this paper which was presented at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) Tenth General Assembly under the theme, 'Africa in the New Millennium,' in 2002, Kahyana presents a bold attempt at analysing popular questions which keep coming up whenever "Asian African literatures or community from East Africa" is mentioned.

He concludes by noting that Ugandan Asians identify themselves as racially distinct and sometimes superior to indigenous Africans. He however notes that their future in East Africa as a racially-distinct community looks hopeful by citing the voting into sixth parliament in Uganda in 2001 of one Jay Tana as the representative of the youth from Uganda's Eastern region. He also cites the Kenyan lawyer-poet, Pheroze Nowrojee. Nowrojee who is also the Chairman of the Asian African Heritage Trust in Nairobi, concurs with Kahyana, "The times are changing, I think," he says, "I think there is a sense that the stereotype [racial chauvinist] is not a fair acknowledgment of the community's role. And conversely, I think the rejection of it is an acknowledgment that the [Asian African] community is as much Kenyan as any other tribe."[50]

In yet another conference paper, "Narrating National Identity: Fiction, Citizenship and the Asian Experience in East Africa," presented at the CODESRIA thirtieth anniversary conference in Dakar in 2003, Kahyana highlights the concept of National identity and attempts to analyse the way this identity is narrated in East African Asian fiction, particularly in the selected novels of Vassanji, Yusuf K. Dawood and Peter Nazareth.[51] He ably designates the idea of 'National identity' as the "postcolonial identities" and analyses the way the writers employ different strategies to discuss the plural identities of Asian Africans from East Africa through generations.

Another notable scholar who is interested with the literature of Asian African writers from East Africa and their treatment of postcolonial identities is Peter Simatei. In his published doctoral dissertation, *The Novel and Politics of Nation-Building in East Africa*, Simatei presents a brilliant discussion of how East African writers, among them Vassanji and Nazareth, seek to actively make history because of their self-perception as the conscience of their various nations.[52] Simatei dwells on the different and sometimes complementary narrative perspectives in the novels of writers as varied as Vassanji, Rubadiri, Ngugi, Nazareth among others.

The main thesis of *Novel and the Politics of Nation-Building* is that the plurality of perspectives demonstrated by East African novelists reflects the complexity of our postcolonial condition. His most significant contribution is the idea that novels by Asian African writers portray a consciousness of how their communities have been oppressed by racist national mythologies in the post-colonial era. In this outstanding book, Simatei has managed to illuminate how writers from both Black and Brown races have constructed

and the reinterpretation of the popular Asian African stereotype of the *dukawallah* to interpret the Asian African experience in East Africa. The following objectives were useful in focusing our endeavour.

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To discursively contextualise how Vassanji's consciousness of his interstitiality as an Asian African writer emanates from within the culture-racial experiences of his community through a historical lens.
2. To supply a critical interpretation of the textual manner in which consciousness of occupying an in-between world influences how Vassanji treats his settings in the selected novels.
3. To further illustrate how the settings of Vassanji's selected novels affect interpretations of major characters such as Nurmohamed Pipa, who is modelled on the popular stereotype of the "dukawallah."

1.6 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Writers from East Africa of South Asian descent, especially MG Vassanji have been claimed by various critics for the African literary traditions, despite the fact that most of them live in the African diaspora especially in Europe and North America. For instance, a review of some of the recent works of African literary criticism by established scholars of African literatures such as Derek Wright, Bernth Lindfors and Gareth Griffith to mention but a few, identify Vassanji as an important transcultural and postcolonial African novelist.[55] The growing interest in the identities,

narratives, experience, politics and discourses of transcultural communities such as the Asian Africans of East Africa within the postcolonial world is but one way of explaining the democratic spirit within African Literary Tradition that relegates to the past the spirit of negrocentrism popular in the 1960s and 1970s.

This study is a critical contribution to the ongoing investigation on the literary practice of Vassanji and other "second-generation, transcultural" African writers such as Ben Okri and Kojo Laing in West Africa and Abdulrazak Gurnah and Jamal Mahjoub from East Africa.[56] The study was conceived as a revisionist exercise within East African postcolonial studies. It celebrates Bhabha's position above, that postcolonialism should be an attempt to engage the ambivalence wrought by many colonialisms and not just one Colonialism.

1.7 SCOPE AND LIMITATION

MG Vassanji is a prolific novelist who quit his flourishing career in Nuclear Physics to become a full-time writer. He has written five novels in just over a decade (1989-2003).[57] Besides, he has also written a collection of short stories entitled, *Uhuru Street*. Vassanji has also edited and co-edited a number works on South Asian diasporic communities around the world, such as *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature*.[58] He owns a publishing house that issues the Toronto-based quarterly, *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* that he edits.[59]

However, the present study focuses strictly on his two novels set in East Africa, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. The selected works

abound with locational cross-referencing through which the reader comes to share in the worlds of the characters. Areas such as Kichwele Street in Dar es Salaam and some neighborhoods in both Kenya and Tanzania introduced in *The Gunny Sack* recur in *The Book of Secrets*. Apart from setting, the selected novels offer solid, reliable and well developed images of the characters and thus supply a good reason to leave out *Uhuru Street* which is also set in East Africa and does feature characters and settings similar to those of the selected texts.

Vassanji's other novels were left out because they are set in North America and treat the Asian African experience in this setting, alien to the researcher. These novels, *No New Land* and *Amriika* did not therefore qualify for analysis within the stated research aims of this study. They lacked the contextual and target thematic relevance stipulated from our earlier discussions at the outset of this study. There is one small but important limitation. As this study was in progress, prolific Vassanji published another Giller-award-winning, East African-based novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* in 2003.[60] Although it was reviewed and read, it was too late to be included in the present study, which was already on course.

1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs postcolonial literary theory also known as postcolonialism. Historians, literary critics, and social scientists use the idea of postcolonialism to examine the ways, both subtle and obvious, in which colonization affects the colonized society. Notwithstanding different time periods, different events and different effects that they consider, all postcolonial theorists and theory admit that colonialism continues to affect the former colonies after political independence. By addressing a culture's colonial history, postcolonial theory empowers a society with the ability to value itself.

According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in *The Post-colonial Reader* point out that postcolonialism deals with the effects of colonisation on cultures and societies.[61] From the late 1970s literary critics have used the term to discuss the various cultural effects of colonisation. Postcolonialism as a literary theory can arguably be summed up as a critique of dominant positions held by hegemonic, political, cultural, racial, linguistic, ethnic, socio-economic, ideological and gender-derived centres and forces inherent or inherited from our colonial pasts. The theory operates from the recognition that the present-day crises in the post-colonial states are in one way or another rooted in our twentieth-century European imperialism. The twentieth-century imperial age was experienced as an intense crisis for the colonised people who had erstwhile been attached to established ways of life and modes of thoughts.

The breaking up of once stable pre-colonial social orders and patterns of thought such as in East Africa, frequently evoke a widespread sense of

social incoherence, fragmentation, chaos and disorder. Out of this stasis which became most apparent by the late 1980s, various Third-World scholars commenced working on fresh, post-colonial world-centred strategies, methodologies and conceptual frameworks to analyse the colonial discourse with, as a way of rationalising the present state of their societies and charting other ways forward. The theory increasingly makes clear the nature and impact of inherited power relations, and their continuing effects on modern global culture and politics. Political questions usually approached from the standpoints of nation-state relations, race, class, economics and gender are made clearer when considered in the context of their relations with the past.

Louis Tyson argues "literary criticism is the application of critical theory to a literary text." [62] In this respect, the application of the interstitial dimension as articulated by Homi Bhabha—a leading postcolonial theorist—in the study of MG Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* is a viable exercise in postcolonial literary criticism. Tyson goes on to posit, "[w]hen approaching a literary text, postcolonial literary theory focuses on the experience and literary production of peoples whose history is characterised by extreme political, social, and psychological oppression."[63] From our foregoing discussion, and in Chapter two of this work, the Asian African community that Vassanji, Nazareth and Warah come from is an appropriate example of one such people identified in Tyson's statement above.

Indeed, postcolonialism as a theoretical framework seeks, "to understand the operations — politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically – of colonialist and anticolonialist *ideologies*...in relation to

the following themes of disillusionment and the struggle for individual and collective cultural identity, of alienation, unhomeliness, double consciousness, and hybridity..."[64][emphasis added].

Ideology as a theoretical tool deserves further elaboration in light of its differential usage in Marxist thinking. The French Marxist-Structuralist philosopher, Louis Althusser, for instance, whose ideas became popular in the 1970s for his break from some of the key features of traditional Marxism focused on the role played by ideology. According to him, it is ideology which shapes our consciousness and social structures. Ideology allows people to imagine that they are making free choices and deciding the course of their lives when, in fact, it is the ideology itself which determines their life

Althusser's view is that we are constituted as subjects through ideology. According to him, there is "a universal human essence and that this essence is the attribute of each single individual who is its real subject".[65] Ideology can be represented in a number of different forms: myths, art, political ideas, and much more. This is another key aspect where his thought differed from traditional Marxism. Whereas Marxism normally postulated a one-to-one correspondence of cause (economics) and effect (social structure), Althusser argued that the consequence was caused by a number of connected dynamics. His connection with postcolonial theory lies in the fact that his ideas influenced the work of Michel Foucault who in turn is a major influence on Homi Bhabha.

This clarification of "ideology" in its Marxist usage and its use in this study we can now delineate the main tenets of Postcolonial literary theory. In fact these tenets have been identified by Tyson who says postcolonial literary theory:

1. Recognises the close relationship between psychology and ideology, or more specifically, between individual identity and cultural beliefs.

2. Analyses the way in which a literary text, whatever its themes, is colonialist or anticolonialist. The theory inspects the ways such a text reinforces or resists colonialism oppressive ideologies.

3. Possesses the ability to help one see the connections among all the domains of human experience—the psychological, ideological, social, political, intellectual, and aesthetic—in ways that show us how inseparable these categories are in lived human experiences.

4. Focuses on the experience and literary production of peoples whose history is characterised by extreme political, social and psychological oppression.

5. Seeks to understand the operations - politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically - of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies.

6. Addresses the problem of cultural identity as its represented in postcolonial literature. This involves—as demonstrated by Said in his seminal book *Orientalism*—moving the "margins" of the work (for example, minor characters in peripheral geographical locations such as diaporas) to the centre of critical analysis and studies.

While the six tenets do capture the gist and agenda of postcolonial literary theory, its trajectory since its recognition in the late 1980s seems somehow ambivalent. The pioneer scholars of postcolonialism, as a literary theory, Ashcroft, Tiffins and Griffith in their seminal text *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial,* have pointed out that the theory appears to be following two major paths at present.[66]

On one hand, via reading of specific post-colonial texts and the effects of their production in and on specific social and historical contexts. On the other via 'revisioning' of received tropes and modes such as allegory, irony, and metaphor and the re-reading of 'canonical' texts in the light of postcolonial discursive practices. It is to this revisionist strand that Bhabha belongs just as Said belongs to the re-reading of the canonical texts—strand. After all, as Ashcroft's and his colleague in *The Post-Colonial Reader*

published seven years after the *Empire Writes Back* demonstrate, postcolonial theory is a heterogeneous ensemble of different—sometimes differing—voices speaking on colonialism and its effects on their societies.

Though this study is located within post-colonial studies in general, it is Homi Bhabha's line of thought as a prominent revisionist that addresses best the concerns of this study. He has not only been at the forefront of advocating for a discursive difference for diasporic and marginalised identities within postcolonial and metropolitan spaces, but has also articulated three most important concerns of the present study. The main crux of Bhabha's thought evident in *The Location of Culture* is captured in the following pronouncement:

> The postcolonial perspective – as is being developed by cultural historians and literary theorists – departs from the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or 'dependency' theory. As a mode of analysis, it attempts to revise those nationalist or 'nativist' pedagogies that set up the relation of Third World and First World in a binary structure of Opposition. The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres.[67]

As Bhabha stipulates, postcolonial theory is employed in this study as a mode of analysis that will enable us theorise the location of Asian African writers such as M. G. Vassanji in East African cultural history, and secondly enable us to explore the influence of M. G. Vassanji's interstitial identity as a postcolonial novelist on his *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*.[68]

1.9 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a library research mainly due to its textual nature. It offers a contrapuntal reading of creative and critical works of literature. This is mainly a conceptual study. One level of the study involves access and use of relevant material from the Kenya National Archives, the Asian African Trust Heritage, Jomo Kenyatta Library at the University of Nairobi, the Moi Library at Kenyatta University, and the Departments of Literature at Kenyatta University, University of Nairobi and University of Dar es Salaam. The Africana services of the Egerton University Library at Njoro and Laikipia provided immense relevant literature. This preliminary level was fundamental to the collection, review, and assessment of secondary material. Extensive Internet research, especially for theoretical and literature reviews were conducted.

The other level of the study involved reading, analysis, and interpretation of *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* as primary sources. The two novels were subjected to a contrapuntal reading as is explained in the definition of terms section [see section 1.3 of this chapter]. This postcolonial reading strategy offered the relevant perspective, fundamental to applying Bhabha's interstitial dimension towards our understanding the social and artistic vision of MG Vassanji as articulated in the selected texts.

The study approaches the selected works as modes of representation crafted by Vassanji as an Asian African writer within the East African literary tradition. This work is structurally divided into two general sections; exploration and exegesis. The first section is made up of conceptual

chapters one and two that stress the affiliations of Vassanji's writings, their origin in the socio-cultural and historical reality of East Africa. The second section comprises of Chapters three and four, each dealing with the three research objectives stated above [See Section 1.5. above]. Chapter five is the conclusion.

CHAPTER TWO

IN(BETWEEN) BLACK AND WHITE: CONTEXTUALISING INTERSTITIALITY AS A CULTURAL LOGIC OF ASIAN AFRICANS

> [F]or criticism to give a true reflection of the work of art, the critic must understand thoroughly not only the language of the author but also the socio-cultural circumstances surrounding the work.
>
> Taiwo Oladele[1]

2.1 Introduction

The Gunny Sack and *The Book of Secrets* represent MG Vassanji's works that are set and developed against actual East African historical happenings, events and sometimes, locations. His other works set in East Africa include the collection of short stories, *Uhuru Street* and his recent novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall.* Scholarly commentaries by critics as varied as Jacqueline Bardolph, Arlene Elder, Chelva Kanaganayakam, John Ball, K. G. Kirchoff, Neloufer de Mel and Amin Malak engage, in different illuminating ways, Vassanji's treatment of East African postcolonial history, Asian African history and his own subjective history.[2] These commentators and others who have done researches on Vassanji such as Peter Simatei, Danson Kahyana and Dan Ojwang' inform us on the relationship between M. G. Vassanji and his East African contexts.

Pursuant to Oladele's conviction cited above, this study finds it appropriate to proceed by appreciating the historical contexts from which Vassanji, his community and texts under study emerge. Moreover, such an approach is encouraged in literary scholarship of African literatures especially in recent times, by scholars such as Anthony Gerard and Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi.[3] Critics of East African postcolonial fiction such as

Simon Gikandi, Muchugu Kiiru and more recently, Peter Simatei, give illuminating insights how the genre and the region's historical experience are indeed, inextricably linked.[4]

This chapter teases out vital contextual information that enables us understand the genesis and genealogy of the interstitial consciousness evident in the writings of Vassanji, and in the cultural experience of Asian Africans from East Africa as a migrant community. Arguing that the creative impulses in the works of postcolonial writers need to be located in the historical experience of our postcolonial world, we maintain Vassanji's selected novels are creative responses to certain historical realities and experiences of the Asian African community.[5]

2.2 Experiential Locations of Culture: Imagining "Asian Africans"

It is indeed vital to recognise contextual influences that inform Vassanji's literary practice. When Vassanji utilizes the history and experiences of his community to create his textual worlds, he enters into what H. H. Okam has called the "pact between a writer and his community, sealing his status as a committed artist."[6] This pact between the writer and his community is often acknowledged by Vassanji himself in the various interviews that he has given.

For instance, upon the publication of his first novel *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji did a homecoming tour of Nairobi and Dar in 1991. In a subsequent interview with the late Wahome Mutahi, he said, "I have tried to define a certain kind of East African Asian, to create a mythology which applies not to a nation as in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's case, but to a minority

which does not know where it belongs."[7] While Vassanji seems to be clear about his commitment and vision as an East African novelist, his view of the Asian African community as "a minority which does not know where it belongs to" is worth attention. In our view, the Asian Africans, as we have seen in the previous chapter, know just where they belong—in that ambivalent interstitial location of culture, between Whites and Blacks in East Africa.

According to Homi Bhabha, a "location" is a micropoint of intersecting simultaneities, containing traces of wider issues.[8] The locating of culture is a process dependent on representation and enunciation, being recognisable by what is said or written about a cultural experience or a cultural community, as collective identities. Bhabha de-essentialises "location" by underlining its constructed, invented nature. For our own purpose, we pin down the notion of location to colonial and postcolonial experiences in East Africa lived by the Asian African community. It is these experiences as contextual influences that *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* textualise as Vassanji creatively imagines the collective interstitiality of his community.

East African writers interested in colonial discourse analysis suggest that a postcolonial community's experiences and the creativity of writers from that community complement each other. For instance, Ngugi posits:

> [F]or a full comprehension of the dynamics, dimensions and workings of a society, the cultural aspects cannot be seen in total isolation from the economic and political ones. The quantity and quality of wealth in a community, the manner of its organization from production to sharing out, affect and are affected by the way in which power is organized and distributed. These in turn affect and are affected by the values of that society. The wealth and power and *self-image of a community* are inseparable."[9] [Emphasis added]

If one reads Ngugi's view together with the revelations made by Vassanji above two important points become evident. Firstly, they concur over the authority of a peoples' location of culture within a given socio-political set-up in determining the cultural logic of the given people. And both Vassanji and Ngugi appear convinced that a people's cultural logic is central to their cultural and personal identities, indeed to how they are narrate their own postcolonial identities from different experiential locations of culture.

This is interesting because the two writers hail from different locations of a common colonial Otherhood; both their communities were subjects of British colonialism in East Africa. Both Ngugi and Vassanji hail from Kenya; were born during the colonial times and had first hand experiences of British colonialism. However, whereas Ngugi's works speak of the experiences of the dominant black/Indigenous masses, Vassanji's social commitment is mainly to the marginal Asiatic cultural community. The Negroid peoples and the Asiatic peoples in East Africa were both colonial subjects despite the fact that the former enjoyed a third class citizenship and the latter a second class citizenship under the British colonial government. In his own words, Vassanji confesses, "...I have dealt in communal [Asian African] history, which is more immediate to me, since it deals with questions having to do with my life."[10]

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Ngugi and Vassanji as East African novelists are related *not* through community but by *association.* Whereas they represent two different experiential locations of East Africa's postcolonial culture, the two major Anglophone East African writers associate through their ex-colonial subjecthood. It is this shared condition of being the Other of the colonial Self that makes it possible for Ngugi and

Vassanji to admirably employ remarkable critiques of the imperial project in East Africa and its aftermath. By employing critical perspectives bound to the colonial Ngugi and Vassanji, like other postcolonial novelists are able through their literary projects to re-member their communal and personal memory to the present-day predicaments and experience. Their works such as Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* and Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* are important contributions to the understanding of the complex psychology of imperialism, especially cultural imperialism viewed from the perspective of ex-colonised peoples.

One of Bhabha's key arguments is that colonial discourse analyses should privilege the reading of literature from colonial subjects as revisions of earlier representations which are described as skewed, insufficient or narrow by the affected.[11] In other words, the postcolonial novels of both Ngugi and Vassanji have as their starting point the mis/under-representation of their communal identities in the powerful colonising narrative of the Empire. It is such a revisionary and revisionist perspective, celebrated by Bhabha that Micere Mugo uses in her seminal book, *Visions of Africa.*[12] She conducts a Manichean reading of Ngugi's work, juxtaposing it with the works of Elspeth Huxley.

Ngugi has confirmed Mugo's thesis by stating that indeed he started out his literary practice fully aware of the wanting representations of the indigenous African people in the works of earlier settlerist writers such as Huxley and Karen Blixen.[13] In the same text, Ngugi advises that it is by historicising or contextualising the experiences of former colonial subjects such as the Asian Africans that a writer can remain committed to the aspirations of his people. This view brings us to reflect critically on why

Vassanji is keen on trying "to define a certain kind of East African Asian, to create a mythology...for a minority."[14]

Why should Vassanji talk of various *kinds* of "East African Asian?" Could it be that there are *other* deficit kinds of East African Asians that he seeks to revise just as Ngugi seeks to revise the deficit kinds of Africans created in the literary worlds of Huxley? What motivated him to quit an illustrious career in the exclusive area of Nuclear Physics so that he can fully dedicate his time, resources and wit to the (re)creation of this kind of mythology for his people?

The answers to these thought-provoking questions somehow lie *outside* Vassanji's texts under study in this thesis. Paradoxically, these answers perhaps lie *inside* Taiwo Oladele conviction that a writer's contexts *inter alia* provide crucial background information that can help us understand novels such as *The Gunny Sack* and the *Book of Secrets* better. It appears that latter-day African scholars who have done comparative literary studies like Mugo's such as Garnette Oluoch-Olunya subscribe to the idea of contextualising postcolonial texts to reveal a better understanding of the issues being addressed by postcolonial writers.[15] Subsequently, we reiterate the significance of teasing out the contextual literary influences that [in]form Vassanji. This will help us understand Vassanji's self-confessed social vision cited above.

2.3. Of Genesis and Genealogy: A Polemical View

It is a popular but fallacious cosmogonic myth in East Africa that Asian Africans, or descendants of former Indian subjects in East Africa are descended in the main from the famous railway-building coolies of the

twentieth-century era. The bid to understand who the Asian African is and where they came from is the impetus of this "coolie myth-fallacy." Such is the pre-text that informs Tony Mochama's recent article, "The Changing Face of Kenyan Asians," published in a popular local daily.[16] In this ill-researched piece of investigative journalism, the coolie myth is yet again broadcasted for the media purpose of mass consumption by the Kenyan public. Mochama with journalistic abandon that is the hallmark of his writing says:

> At the turn of the 20th century, Asians descended on Kenya in their (sic) thousands as part of the British "engineering effort" to construct the "lunatic" rail line from Mombasa to Kisumu...This gets supported by the personal testimony [read authority] of a Mrs Harsita Waters who in the same article 'explains,' The coolies, that is our babajis (grandfathers) and mamachis (grandmothers) were *the first generation of Asians to set foot in this country...*[17] [Emphasis added]

This popular perception provides this chapter with the trust from which we make our argument. It is a historical fact that a generation of Indians came to East Africa to build the colonial railways. However, it is an enduring popular fallacy that these coolies "were the first generation of Asians to set foot in this country." Mochama, an investigative journalist, was advancing a well-established yet inaccurate myth that lacks historical validity. Let us find out why that popular myth that invents for many of us the "Asians" in East Africa is erroneous and fallacious.

Colonial labour records show that roughly two-thirds of the Indian coolies who came to Kenya as part of British "engineering effort" went back home, as a substantial population of the same succumbed to the inhuman conditions they did face. Scholars such as David Apter have contested the coolie thesis with solid historical evidence. Apter says:

> The nature of Indian social organization was dimly understood by Europeans and Africans; in addition, a folklore had grown up about them which readily lent itself to prejudice. It was widely believed, for example, that the Indians who came to Uganda were actually indentured servants brought for work on the railways. This was not the case. In an unpublished monograph, "why Indians came to East Africa," Nigel Oram writes that approximately 31,983 Indians were imported to East Africa, of whom 16312 were time-expired contract labourers and dismissed (the Indian Government permitting emigration for a term of three years): 6454 were invalided and 2493 died. Oram indicates, "This left 6274 who presumably stayed in East Africa unaccounted. "Since the Uganda portion of the unaccounted would remain relatively small, the myth of Indian coolies as the basis of the Indian population is easily discounted...[18]

The figures above overtly challenge any populist conviction that Mochama's Kenyan Asians could have all descended from the British coolie labour. This is especially so as the 6274 that chose to remain were distributed all over East Africa, and not just Kenya. This in essence means that Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar shared the coolie labour that remained.

The central concern in the context of our arguments in this chapter remains to try and establish how this fallacious coolie thesis or what we can call "Harsita Myth" affects Asian African writers in general. Ultimately, we shall also see how it also affects Vassanji's praxis as an Asian African writer from, East Africa.

2.3.1. Disavowing the Harsita Myth

East African mythologists have argued how theoretical perspectives in vogue shape or distort our understanding of folkloric materials.[19] A false or inaccurate mythical account telling of a people's genesis and genealogy, which later becomes popular can be a dangerous epistemic weapon. This is what the historical novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah has been saying throughout his literary practice, a point he emphasised on his recent tour to Nairobi.[20] His general argument is that it is the responsibility of scholars to engage in an

accurate way the geneses of the African peoples, and factors that have given rise to their present predicament.

There is need to re-learn our genesis and genealogy of ourselves and that of our neighbours in order to understand the value of our cultural differences as an approach to locating solid avenues of cultural intercourse. Nevertheless, this need should always be founded on accurate information such as supplied by Apter and Oram above, rather than fallacies perpetuated by the likes of Mochama and Waters.

The Harsita Myth is a potent tool in two ways. Firstly, for the basic reason that it is inaccurate yet it does bear like all myths, an element of truth. Secondly, because the perpetrator, Waters, is considered an authority by strength of her Asian African identity. As we have earlier on stated, it is a popular view in East Africa that Asian Africans are descendants of colonial Indian labour. This fact can be attested to by the origins of writers such as Peter Nazareth and Bahdur Tejani, whose forbearers immigrated into the region as part of British labour moved from its Indian colony to establish and run the just established colonial systems in East Africa. Nazareth has fictionalised this personal account in his novel *In a Brown Mantle.*[21] And yet colonial Indian labour took many forms. They served in such capacities as the middle-level cadres of the civil service, the armed forces and police systems and also the legal-educational systems.

The main epistemic danger posed by the Harsita Myth is that it is the basis for the familiar question often posed to Asian Africans by "informed" Indigenous Africans: If you came to serve the British colonial government, and they left after independence, then why are you still here? It is also the same bent of mind that informed Jomo Kenyatta's famous description of

"The Guest Race" whenever he referred to the Asian Africans in Kenya.[22] After all, were they not a guest race as East Africa was not their home after their masters had "departed"? There is no doubt that any claims to an identity are intricately bound to the location or land from which such claims are articulated. This can also be said about our explanations of how we came to be in our present locations in the first place and when we did arrive there.

Writers such as Jameela Siddiqi, a Ugandan born Asian African expelled in the Amin purge of 1972/3 argues that Amin relied on populist anti-Asian sentiments which were grounded on the perceived close ties between Asian Africans with the imperialist British.[23] Her views have been elaborated and recorded by historians such as J. S. Mangat, Dana April Seidenberg and David Apter. To approach the genesis of the Asian African people from the perspective of Harsita Waters is to reinforce the view that the community is one of the last symbols, or reminders of British imperialism in East Africa that we must do without.

Charles Sarvan has argued that indeed, self-images of Asians in East African literature tend to be of a stereotyped kind.[24] For instance, he cites the limiting view of looking at such a diverse community as that of the Asian Africans through the *dukawallah image* per se; an image that became popular after the coolie population in East Africa settled down to do business upon the completion of the railway construction. This image of the Asian African community as a *dukawallah* community rests on the generalisation that all members of that community only engage in commerce; corrupt commerce at that. The wretchedness of that perception

is aptly captured in the words of Keval, a fictional figure out of one of the Ugandan Asian African poet-playwright, Jagjit Singh's plays:

> [T]he wretchedness of being an Indian in Africa today...Always being *the brown man out, the odd man,* the foreigner, the Wahindi...little frightened fishes swimming frantically in water made dirty by our commerce and trade; always afraid the big black minister will pull us out and throw us away, far, far away to die without our dear commerce and trade. Yes, I'll write stories about how wretched and frightened we are today - always being bullied, insulted everywhere - in parliament, on the radio, on T.V, on the roads...(pause)...Dirt carriers we were of the British.[25][Emphasis added]

The reason Keval feels passionately that he can rely on stories to inform the world, as it were, about the predicament of being an "Indian in Africa today" is predicated on the view that his people might have been misunderstood or mistaken.

We must note Keval himself is a *university student* whose *dukawallah* father is persuading to pursue a course in medicine, rather than groom him to inherit the family enterprise. The emplacement of Keval in such an informed subject-position—a university student at Makerere of the sixties—is a discursive strategy meant to offer a kind of mythology for his estranged community in East Africa. The discursive strategy of authorising the subject-position of the narrating voice or main characters away from the Harsita Myth is a common and conscious feature of most Asian African writings from East Africa. This is why D' Souza, is a government official in Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle*; Shamser is a teacher in Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*; Sunil is a motor mechanic in Sondhis's *Sunil's Dilemma*; Salim Juma is a teacher [of History] in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* or Pius Fernandes, is also a History teacher in Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets.*[26]

The authority traditionally found, especially in the teacher subject-position is not just prevalent in Asian African writing but also disavows the

dominant populist perception of Asian Africans as coolie-originated, conniving *dukawallahs*—a common trope that speaks of imperialist/capitalist exploitation. Interestingly, we notice that whereas the teacher subject-position is a preferred site of representational authority in Asian African literature, the same does not apply to the works of White and Black writers.

We have in mind here the prevalence of the *dukawallah* stereotype, which appears in the form of Ramlagoon Dharamashah in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Rhemtullah in Emmanuel Mbogo's *Watoto wa Mamantilie*, or Effendi in Rubadiri's *No Bride Price,* Choleim Hussein in Blixen's *Out of Africa* and the nameless factory owner in Okot's *White Teeth.*[27] The authority that the *dukawallah* stereotype propagates is the same authority that the Harsina Myth propagates; a dehistoricised and prevaricated authority based on one aspect of an otherwise culturally ambivalent, racially distinct minority in East Africa.

It is for this reason that Sarvan argues with respect to the foregoing thus, "although of a passing nature, the references in African literature to Asians are valuable, *for they reveal attitudes naturally*, whereas sustained, self-conscious studies may not succeed in doing so...These scattered references *not only indicate the opinions of the writers but*, what is more important, may influence the non-Asian reader, and *so perpetuate beliefs and prejudices.*"[28] (Emphasis added) His argument finds support in Okumba Miruka's reflections in his book review of Vassanji's short stories collection *Uhuru Street.* Miruka posits, "although the immigrant Asian community has become naturalized to East Africa. (sic) It still remains an intriguing phenomenon to many [native] Africans, who view all Asians as inherently

Although the Act was crucial to the mass emigration of colonial subjects from India to East Africa, Mangat and Seidenberg argue harmonious contact between the two lands existed long before even the British came to East Africa. This in effect dismantles the popular prevarication that Indians were a kind of "colonial baggage" that the British brought and forgot to collect as they were leaving in the tense days of independence in East Africa.

Finally, Harsita Waters and Mochama's popular views seem blind to the historical fact that early European visitors to East Africa, the Portuguese, recorded Indian presence and "flourishing Afro-Asian settlements all along the East African coast as early as the 16th century."[34] The respected scholar of East Africa's interracial history, Robert G. Gregory in his monumental book *India and East Africa: A History of Race Relations within the British Empire, 1890-1939* supports the idea of early Indian settlements even before the dawn of imperialism in East Africa.[35] We now embark on an argument that aspires to establish the origins and development of the inter-racial discomfort between Asian Africans and indigenous Africans in East Africa as former British subjects. Ultimately, we will be tracing the itinerary of interstitiality as a cultural logic of Asian Africans in East Africa through a historical lens.

2.4. Empowerment and Emasculation

From the pre-colonial era in East Africa, "Indian" entrepreneurial proclivities had already been noted by amongst others, Seyyid Said. The famous Sultan of Zanzibar upon moving his seat of power from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1840 was followed by a large community of Indian traders who had been living

and trading in Muscat and other littoral towns of the Indian Ocean for many centuries.

Mangat notes that while Seyyid Said's Zanzibar (*Jongbar* to the early Indian merchants such as Dhanji Govindji in *The Gunny Sack*) became an important market and emporium in the Indian Ocean mercantile trade, the Indians were prospering and well settled in East African coastal towns.[36] The population of the Indians at the coast stood at 1000 in 1840 and between 5000-6000 in 1860.[37] The magnitude and patterns of Indian settlement led to the assertion by the British slave-abolitionist C. P. Rigby around mid nineteenth-century that "all shopkeepers and artisans in Zanzibar are natives of India."[38]

This era is captured vividly in the introductory chapters of historically-informed *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. By 1870, many Indian families were living in Zanzibar. Most of Vassanji's community, the Ishmailis [otherwise known as the Shamsis] had settled with their families on the East African coast from Lamu to Dar es Salaam and spoke Swahili as a *lingua franca*.[39] In general, the success of Indian merchants such as Tharya Topan, Nasser Lillani, Ibji Sewji, Damodar Jairam and Jairam Sewji under the rule of Said gave this diasporic, trading Indian community socio-economic and political eminence.

This was to later be the root of envy and resentment against Indian merchants in East Africa.[40] Mangat notes that a series of critical comments and popular conceptions and misconceptions about them gained considerable currency from accounts of British observers. Stereotyping descriptions such as, "crafty, moneymaking, cunning, intensely polite, local Jews, cheats, thieves and unscrupulous" were not uncommon.[41]

Commercial proclivities, thrifty living based on firm religious beliefs, coupled with their cultural difference (epitomised by their closed-door way of life) were aspects of typical Indian life at that time. This Indian culture aroused aggression and harassment by the anti-Indian, post- Seyyid Said Arab leadership.

We submit that the insecurity that ensued from this anti-Indian wave of resentment can be interpreted as one of the earliest indicators of their shaky future as a diasporic community in East Africa; firstly under Arab rule, then British imperial rule, and thirdly under the postcolonial governments of East Africa. In keeping with the foregoing submission, we now present a number of nodal points argued as having been crucial to the formation of the Asian African community's interstitiality as is eschewed in Vassanji's fiction. These points are mainly based on crucial and influential legislations, political and cultural manoeuvre in the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries respectively. These were passed by the British, and the Arab authorities of the East Coast of Africa that had far reaching implications affecting the Asian community in East Africa then and now.

Around the time that Vassanji's ancestors was settling in East Africa, that is between 1824 and 1826 a crucial policy was passed by the British with Arab approval. The policy was an expression of political support for Indian merchants trading under the British flag.[42] This policy can be perceived as an early trace of the British interest in Indians of East Africa and the role that the British were going to make them play in latter day power wrestling with the Arabs. We suggest that the Indians might have willingly partnered with the British due to the insecurity that the community

experienced from time to time under Arab rule. Lawrence Hollingsworth in his pioneering book, *Asians of East Africa* in fact points out that indeed there had been the subordination of the Hindus (read Indians) in the mercantile period.[43]

With the coming of the British to the East African coast in the first half of the nineteenth-century came cracks and incitement within and against the Indian-Arab socio-economic relations. The British needed an ally in East Africa with whom they could cooperate in common struggle against Arab-run Slave trade. Considering British imperial administrative policy of divide and rule, the British naturally sought another community besides the Arabs for political and social support as they settled in East Africa.

Many of the Indian merchants on the littoral towns and trading centres of East Africa had settled with their kith and kin under the reign of the Omani Arabs. This observation was made by the slave abolitionist C. P. Rigby and Frederic Holmwood.[44] The two noted that the Muslim Indians seem to have come to stay while Hindus still had a strong attachment to India, their motherland. Hollingsworth elaborates Rigby and Holmwood's observation in his study of the history of the Asians of East Africa by observing that many Indians by mid and late nineteenth-century regarded East Africa as home. This applied more to the Muslim element than to the Hindus who often return to their homeland after they have made a competence abroad.[45]

The Rigby and Holmswood thesis was later challenged in 1875 by the British agent, Sir Bartle Frere who saw and called the Indians of East Africa "birds of passage." In essence, Frere argued East Africa was not a homeland but a borderland or diaspora for the Indians who after exploiting the

resources available wait for an opportunity to go elsewhere. Frere's argument was obviously based on a personal and subjective perspective of an "alien" to East Africa. Such is the case if one argues that at the time of making his utterance, Frere had just arrived in East Africa after a tumultuous imperial service as the governor of Bombay. His view is contested by Mangat who argues that on the contrary, the Indians had many commercial investments in goods and real estate that anchored them to East Africa and some had even lost/given up touch with their original homelands on the Indian subcontinent.[46]

Mangat's argument is in fact the basis on which the Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul's controversial *A Bend in the* River is written.[47] This illuminating novel deals with the exploits and explorations of an Asian African merchant with a pre-colonial African heritage in an emergent East African nation-state. After Seyyid Said, the East African littoral region gradually came under British influence and in 1886 the British colonial government passed an Amendment to the 1883 Emigration Act. The Amendment legalised and encouraged Indian immigration into East Africa, especially as indentured labour on three-year contract terms. By this time the relationship between the Indians and the British could be termed as warm and based on cooperation and amity. After all, many of the Indians émigrés then were already British subjects from another British colony—India.

Many of the legislations passed by the British around this time served to empower the Indian communities in various ways. For instance, in the 1890s what came to be called the "Open up the Hinterland Policy" led to increased and significant penetration of the East African hinterland.[48] This

might explain why many indigenous Africans from the hinterland regions of East Africa met the Indians first before meeting the Whites. The consequence of the encounter was that after establishing the colonial link between the two immigrant communities, the Indians became a more immediate subject of anti-imperialist agenda. In other words, the natives of East Africa could not understand the difference between the Whites and the Asians, for both being aliens, especially in the hinterlands, were considered to be partners in the colonisation of East Africa.

There is little doubt that at the height of their technical cooperation with the British in the early years of imperialism, Indians were an empowered East African people. The role of the Indian immigrant in the pacification of the native East Africans and establishment of imperialism has been significantly noted in the views of two important architects of British imperialism in East Africa, Winston Churchill and Harry Johnstone.[49] In these early but crucial stages of British imperialism in East Africa, most Indian labour participated at three levels: Semi-skilled and skilled government labourers (civil servants), Indian troops (that were mainly used in punitive expeditions against native Africans who resisted British encroachment into their lives) and Indian traders. All these different cadres are represented by Vassanji's diverse characterisation in *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*.

According to Mangat, by 1908, Churchill and Johnston affirmed the role of the Indian immigrant as a "backbone" of the early colonial machinery in East Africa.[50] They supported government aided immigration of the Indians in East Africa with incentives such as employment and freedom of enterprise while arguing that curtailing or checking the influx of Indians

into this new British sphere of influence would make both the colony and commerce to "collapse as a puff ball."

By the late 1900s, East Africa rapidly changed into a multi-cultural and multi-racial territory. Scores of settlers from Germany, Britain, Greece and India were intensifying their immigration into this favourable region. Vassanji captures this historical moment in *The Book of Secrets*, which opens with the arrival of the fictional colonial administrator Alfred Corbin [modelled on Harry Johnston] and later that of the narrator Pius Fernandes as a teacher from Goa.[51] This mass immigration notwithstanding, we must remember that any point of confluence is of course a point of contestation. The socio-cultural and political disharmonies that pit the Indian community against the White settler community in East Africa clearly attest to this fact.

As White settlers moved into East Africa, and the second wave of Indian immigrants, the one Harsita Waters points to at the outset of this chapter, came into the British controlled colonial East Africa, there followed a rise of political problems inextricably linked to the cultural differences of the various races and issues to do with the colonial desire for space. The problems and tensions, mainly between the Indian community and the white settler community arose from the clash of divergent interests and aspirations mainly within their shared locations of culture in Uganda and Kenya.[52] This tumultuous moment marked the turning point in erstwhile (af)filiative relationship that had characterised Anglo-Indian relations in East Africa in general and especially in Kenya. The situation then, was an interesting one.

On the one hand, the British settlerist campaign against the Indians revolved around two nineteenth-century narrow definitions of the Indians.

Firstly, it hinged on Rigby's idea based on cultural difference of the Indians as "crafty" trader, as an "undesirable" neighbour owing to his "sanitary habits." Secondly, it hinged on the Frere's thesis based on cultural ambivalence of the Indians as disloyal to East Africa as a homeland, and heavily linked to their Indian motherland.[53] On the other hand, the Indians in attempts to assert themselves as "East Africans" against the bias of these Anglocentric allegations insisted on the equality of all the subjects and saw themselves as a challenge to British imperialist and racist inclinations in East Africa.[54]

Out of their cultural struggles as subject peoples in India, the Indians struggles in East Africa had an effect even on the indigenous Black majority. Carl G. Rosberg Jnr. and John Nottingham in their illuminating book, *The Myth of Mau Mau; Nationalism in Kenya*, point out that leaders of the Indians and Africans formed working ties in a common challenge against Anglocentrism.[55] Under their political leaders notably, M. A. Desai and Harry Thuku, Indians and Africans as colonial subjects appeared to have ignored their stark cultural differences. On the contrary, the political discourse of the two communities, as advanced by their respective leaders then, was concerned with militating against colonial policies and politics that did favour the White-settler community.

Rosberg and Nottingham, as well as White writers such as Huxley and Blixen point out that the Indians, under their leader Desai in his capacity as the president of the then influential East African Indian National Congress, were engaged in a bitter racialist struggle with the Europeans for equality of opportunity and rights which they later presented as grievances to the colonial government.[56] The British on their part argued their

supremacist case on grounds of racial and cultural purism juxtaposed with Indian orientalist exoticism.

Their position was unambiguously set out in 1919 in the final racialist report of an Economic Commission appointed by Sir Henry Belfield.[57] We should be alert that all these events revolved mainly around matters of cultural difference and contestations of racial representations aimed at emasculation of the Indian community. The agitation by Indians for equality suggests that the community had long lost their "equal" partnership with the British, negotiated in the nineteenth-century, and was actually being emasculated socially, politically and ultimately economically.

Mangat argues the general character of the Indian role in East Africa has largely been determined by the policies adopted towards them.[58] It is such a consciousness that informs the thematic vision of Jagjit Singh's famous poem, "Portrait of an Asian as an East African." Especially when Singh contemplates:

> The past has boiled itself over
> and we are the steam that must flee...
>
> I shall summon you therefore,
> Ancestral spirits of my race,
> On this great issue of citizenship,
> and you plead before the minister
> for being born so brown
>
> and soon we shall be flying ,
> unwelcome vultures all over the world,
> only to unsheathe fresh wrath
> each time we land[59]

The contradiction that lies deep within this tragic lamentation can be seen when we remember that the early Black African responses to Indians, as is portrayed by Rossberg and Nottingham and hinted at by Sarvan were accommodative. Due to Indian political assertiveness, economic prowess,

and strong cultural identity, the British like the Omanis before had wanted to malign the Indian settler, whom they now perceived as a competitor rather than a colleague within the colonial political equation.[60]

Could it be that the British, like the Omanis, had feared that the Indians could politicise their minds and bid for regional leadership? Or could it be that, having been under the British imperial crown, the Indians were seen as a negative political influence on the Black Africans who were still by and large unconscious to the very idea of colonialism?

These critical reflections were arguably the foundation of British attempts in 1921 to incite the indigenous Africans against Indians. Harry Thuku, then an influential leader in Kenyan politics and the leader of Young Kikuyu Association thwarted the effort and on 10th July of the same year declared solidarity with the Indian cause. Much of the Afro-Indian cooperation or associations against British colonial policy and supremacist claims remain occluded from mainstream East African politico-historic discourse as Seidenberg, E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo and other historians have argued.[61]

The role of the Indians in African nationalism—political, cultural or literary—in Kenya as metonym of East Africa is a feature that needs to be appreciated so as to accurately understand the cultural logic and locus of the Asian Africans today. Although skilled but largely illiterate, Indian peasants did offer supplementary aid in setting up the British imperial project in East Africa. However, Indian scholars such as M. A Desai, used their expertise, political platforms such as the East African Indian National Congress and radical Indian newspapers like *East African Chronicle* to initiate and advocate for various indigenous African grievances over land,

labour and wages policies.[62] Desai also distributed Swahili articles by Harry Thuku and other emergent Kenyan political voices such as Job Muchuchu.

This Indian support for the African cause in the early years of the British colonial system in East Africa, especially in the Inter-War years posed a major challenge to the British colonial government. Ironically, it also presented a dilemma to the bulk of the Indian community—largely illiterate and unpoliticised—who could not decide whether to support, the colonial government, or the native Africans who were establishing the foundation of their future political and national struggles. What is crucial in this argument is the point that the authoritative voice of the colonial or struggling people has always been found in their leaders and not in the populace. Just as the indigenous African people were divided in loyalty to the British government, so too were the Indians, especially so because diasporic. The Indian uncertainty could also have arisen partially from the shifting positions of the colonial government with regards to the Asian community.

However leaders from the two subject constituencies, such as Desai and Thuku knew and utilised the benefits of cooperation and association. This is illustrated in a historical and historic event in Kenyan national history. The African Riot of November 1922 in Nairobi presented a test of Afro-Indian ties especially following Thuku's arrest. The then Governor of India, an Indian, is quoted as having said:

> The Indian community in East Africa is between two fires [interstitial]. If it is sympathetic with native aspirations, it is said to be politically dangerous. If it keeps aloof it is said to be doing nothing for the people of the country. This to me is the most crucial manifestation of the dilemma of the Asian community as a "caught-in-between-two centres" community.[63]

In keeping with our argument, the Governor had at last found the cultural logic of his kinsmen in the East African Diaspora. Not only had he identified interstitiality as the cultural logic of Indians in East Africa, he had also classified it a kind of dilemma which ensued from occupation of an in-between point in an antagonistic encounter between Britain and East African indigenous community.

The struggles between the white settlers and the Indian community in Kenya reached its (anti) climax in 1923. The Indian cultural struggles against British imperialism that had come to be known as the 'Indian Question' found their resolution in the Devonshire White Paper entitled *Indians in Kenya*, Cmd.1922 (1923).[64] This famous legislative paper denied any preferential treatment to either Indian or White community and asserted the paramountcy of native African interests.

Devonshire was a watershed for the Indian Question in East Africa, and subsequently supplies a suitable though theoretical point which, can be argued as the first conscious effort towards emasculating the Indian community in East Africa. It marked the zenith of the heightened inter-racial conflicts between the Indian and British communities not just in colonial Kenya, but also in Uganda and Tanzania.[65] The Indian Question that had been characterised by the need for tolerance towards cultural ambivalence and cultural difference besides improved political representation in the Legislative Council (Leg Co) succumbed to imperial force.[66]

It mainly facilitated the entrenchment of a segregationist policy in the colonial administration of British East Africa. In our view, these tense times not unlike a state of emergency can plausibly be envisioned as the turning point for all race-relations in East Africa. This is because in the aftermath of

the Devonshire Declaration, we can feel the implied emergentness (Bhabha's term) and urgency with which the British purportedly had wanted to safeguard indigenous African interests from exploitative migrant populations. Bhabha succinctly posits, "a state of emergency is also a state of emergence." [67] But what was emerging from the state of emergency that was the pre- and immediate post Devonshire East Africa?

To begin with, Britain's arbitration of the Indian Question in East Africa represented a political statement by the colonial government. It confirmed that the early policy of direct Indian association with imperial effort in East Africa had finally been abandoned and substituted with a policy of intolerance towards the community.[68] The Whites [settlers] never really lost. After the Devonshire Declaration the East African colonial society was compartmentalised into three broad racial types: Europeans (mainly British), Asians (mainly Indians) and native Africans (sometimes the coastal Arabs were clustered here) in that order of descendancy.

This arrangement not only made the Indian community to recognise that they were colonial subjects. It also made them, literally, an *interstitial* community in East Africa caught in-between the worlds of the first-class citizenry, the Whites and the third-class citizenry, the Blacks. From this perspective it is possible to understand the future plight or situation of the Asian Africans in the post-independence nation-states in East Africa.

Some scholars have argued the colonial state was based on conflict and crisis control, as was the case in Kenya.[69] If this was the case, then one of the crises that was never controlled was that of the in-betweeness of the Asian Africans in a racialist colonial experience that could only see the world in terms of White and Black. Other scholars have gone further to posit that

the postcolonial nation-states in Africa were just an inheritance of the states and institutions of the colonial states.[70] In this case, the vicissitudes of the colonial state like that in Kenya were somehow carried over to the postcolonial states, racialist consciousness included. In brief, the general effect of the Whitepaper, from the Indian angle of vision finds an apt expression in the words of Seidenberg. It was simply "an unmitigated disaster."[71]

Asian Africans descended from this community that had come to East Africa without any traceable or recorded political agenda, but now found itself the victim of a political fiat orchestrated by erstwhile British "comrades-in-the-Diaspora." A community whose main impetus of coming to East Africa, typical to the migrant conscience, was to better their living conditions. The same migrant conscience that drove the Bukusu from "Misri" to Kenya and the Luo from Bahr el Ghazal to Kenya now made the Indians exist in a stratified existence, uncannily reminding them of the one they had left behind, in India.

The "sandwich" socio-cultural arrangement became not only a reality of the multicultural colonial societies of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, but also an enduring distinctive feature of the region's cultural experience viewed from a racial standpoint. The situation has not changed much in the post-independence period. Thus developed interstitiality as a cultural logic with respect to the Asian African community in East Africa as we understand it today. Has the community through its articulate members such as Warah, Sondhi, Nazareth, and Vassanji finally discovered that they are heirs of a cultural logic with a history to it? This appears to be the

(un)conscious case as is evident in the various pronouncements by these writers, as we have argued.

Steadily, post-Devonshire colonial policies and ordinances reflected that stratified social authority. For instance, the interstitial status of the Indian community was authoritatively entrenched through orchestrated communal system of representation in political spaces, racialist policies of land reservation and segregation and the government provision of separate social services.[72] Perhaps, the most conscious British effort of what Ali Mazrui in a different context called "cultural engineering," can be seen in the crafting and enactment of the *Control Immigration Ordinance of 1948*.[73] Seidenberg, notes that this ordinance based all immigration on whether the new-comer would contribute to the wealth of East Africa or compete with the native.[74]

This legislation was very crucial in curtailing and barring the Indian immigration to East Africa in general and Kenya in particular.[75] The justification by the colonial office was simple. It was based on inherited traditional views of the Indians as "exploiters" and "birds of passage" who were amassing wealth and returning it to their originary homeland. Such a tendency was detrimental to the interests of the colonial government. Although let us not forget that the British too were locked in this economic-migrant mentality or *modus operandi*. In fact, this contradiction and hypocrisy finds a vivid manifestation in the settlerist novels by the famous colonist writer, Elspeth Huxley.[76] It is the distinctive feature of the economic migrant to plough back the amassed wealth to his/her originary point. This feature is shed when the migrant is accommodated in or by the diaspora and finds in it a home as had Indians over the centuries.

The 1948 Ordinance by the British was a decisive moment for the fate of the Indian community in East Africa. This is less because it came in the twilight of the colonial power in this region, and more because it signified the last overt discord between these two migrant communities. As if a backdrop for these estrangements, East Africa was steadily but surely moving towards an uncertain future marked by the rise of Indian-instigated African nationalism. This increasing political awakening of the indigenous Africans was fuelled by the pursuit for self-determination and in essence meant a call for Black-majority rule and an unknown future for the "interstitialised,"unhomely Indians—a feeling that ran deep across the Asian African communities on the night of Independence and is captured by Vassanji thus:

> Independence was painless. A man's colour is no sin in Tanganyika, said Nyerere. The hooligans who go about making wild statements that the events of Congo would be repeated in Tanganyika should be severely reprimanded, scolded the Herald. Tanganyika is not Congo, where nuns were raped, hundreds murdered and shops looted...there was some doubts and speculations; Kakar the lecherous grocer in Mrs Daya building stockpiled corned beef tins and rice and potatoes in his store...and on Independence day, at midnight, zero hour, while the decorated street below was empty of a man or a motor vehicle, sitting silent, and neglected, like a bride not picked up on the fateful day upstairs, sitting around the ancient Phillips oracle, we [Asian Africans] saw in our minds eye the light turn off at the stadium, the Union Jack quietly come down and the lights turn on again to reveal the new green and black and gold national flag flying...[77]

In retrospect, the epitome of British empowerment and emasculation of the Indian community seems to have [r]evolved around what Mangat terms "the twin foundation of their presence in East Africa.[78] This foundation rests on the three main impetuses of Indian immigration into East Africa that have already been discussed at the outset of this chapter. These are *colonial government employment in the civil service, government employment in military departments* (Mangat merges the first two into one) *and commercial*

enterprise. Notice that (m)any allegations levelled against this community [even today] are mainly premised on their alleged/perceived malpractices in the three original spheres of their East African social life.

Indigenous African politicians and intellectuals who profess anti-Asian sentiments have juxtaposed the privileged place of the 'alien' Indians in the government and commercial sectors of postcolonial governments with the "underpriviledges" of their "true" African peoples in the three spheres.[79] We have in mind an observation made by Seidenberg concerning the veteran Kenyan politician Martin Shikuku. In the post-independence political dispensation, Shikuku and other "popular political demagogues with short memories continued to test the waters of racist political debates. Depicting the Asian community as dangerously exploitative, they measured the Africans' own declining economic status against the prospects of a world dominated by Asian capitalist megalomaniacs"[80] This racialist politicians and their political agenda are also well captured in the poetic words of Singh's poem, "Portrait of an Asian as an East African," when he says: black surgeons/ too have prescribed new drugs/ and we/ malignant cells/ must fade away soon.[81]

Apart from their traditional commercial success, the other issue that has been brought up against the Asian Africans by politicians and indigenous African people alike is the lack of miscegenation between Indians or Asian Africans and indigenous Africans. Remember that in traditional African systems, the most common approach to cultural difference is integration through marriage. Although Tejani treats this theme sympathetically in his novel, *Day After Tomorrow*, Vassanji accurately captures the complexity of the same in his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*. A

post-independence Tanzanian politician who has been invited to grace an Asian African function to give the keynote address as the Chief Guest roars, "[t]he Asians are not integrating enough! If you want to stay in Africa, you must learn to live with Africans...the days of your *dukas* are numbered!" [Emphasis added (*Gunny Sack*, 162)

All in all, the three colonially derived impetuses or (pre)occupations if you like, remain important arenas where the interstitial logic of Asian Africans is perpetually intellectualised and argued. Asian African writers in general and Vassanji specifically construct their narratives and fictional worlds around these colonially engineered triple spheres of Asian African experience. A remarkable effort to encapsulate all the three impetuses at ago through a cleverly contextualised coolie-oriented, *dukawallah* account resulted in the literary achievement that is Giller prize-winning, *The In-Between Worlds of Vikram Lall* by Vassanji. In a brilliant sum up of his deplored *dukawallah* self, Lall utters the following words at the very beginning of the novel:

> My name is Vikram Lall. I have the distinction of having been numbered one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning. To me has been attributed the emptying of a large part of my troubled country's treasury in recent years. I head my country's List of Shame. These and other descriptions actually flatter my intelligence, if not my moral sensibility. But I do not intend here to defend myself or even to tell my story...it is with an increasing conviction of its truth, that if more of us told our stories to each other, where I come from, we would be a far happier and less nervous people. [82]

Perhaps one of the stories that Vikram Lall would have [and did] narrated about his people, the Asian Africans of East Africa is that their lives are today mainly the outcome of three impetuses mentioned above. This coming back of the once marginal voices to claim a part in the narration of their nation has interesting ramifications.

It does point out that the desires in postcolonial writers such as M. G. Vassanji to write about the experiences of their people are born out of a certain problem. The problem is that the ambivalent identifications of love and hate between the Blacks and the Browns occupying the same psychic space of the Colonial Other are haunted by paranoid projections out of the two communities bent on understanding themselves and their neighbours. These projections "outwards" return to haunt and split the nation-space from which they are made. So long as a firm boundary is maintained between the two territories and the narcissistic wound evident in the two Colonial Others is contained, the aggression will be always be projected on to the Other or the Outside.

It is that desire to really make sense out of the colonised peoples' experience and that of Others around them that drives colonised communities towards conflicts with each other. This might explain why the colonial perception of the Asian African community as a conniving *dukawallah* lot with an economic-migrant mentality deeply-rooted in India seems to be very popular among indigenous Africans like Shikuku.[83] The authority of a racialist colonial legacy towards the Asian community is indeed a colonial inheritance. The argument has always been that Asian Africans were fence sitters [read interstitial] in the anti-colonial, nationalist campaign towards self-determination and independence. This argument is contested and rendered as limited as the Harsita Myth by the facts and statistics that the nationalist Chanan Singh [later High Court Judge] supplies in "Later Asian Protest Movement."[84]

What should not be lost to the reader is our submission concerning the genesis and genealogy of xenophobic attitudes towards the Asian African

community. We have argued and illustrated how the British colonial government had also inherited the xenophobic attitudes towards the Asian community from the nineteenth-century Arab rulers of East African littoral communities. In other words, anti-Asian sentiments inherited from the British by indigenous African peoples in East Africa, seen contextually through a historicised perspective have become a kind of racialist tradition that is learned like all traditions are, and passed over from generation to generation. Seidenberg puts it this way:

> Apart from natural xenophobia that occurs almost everywhere, East Africa notwithstanding, anti-Asian resentment was a continuation of a systematic colour-coding of society which, as explained above, ran deep into the foundations of colonial society. With no strong ideological framework in place to define an ecumenical state of diverse cultures, and no economic programme to support it, Africans were dependent on their xenophobic attitudes, these exacerbated by biases implanted by the colonial state. African elites and others began to express anti-Asian sentiments as Asians began to become successful in a predominantly [postcolonial] African country.[85]

Her view become crucial when we accurately remember Africans and Asians, both of whom were subject-peoples under British imperialism in Africa and India had at one time cast their lot together against British settler dominance in the 1920s.

As a matter of fact Sarvan argues "...there is hardly any evidence of resentment of the Asians by (native) Africans in the years preceding World War One."[86] Pursuant to Seidenberg's view, we submit such xenophobic resentment amongst the native African peoples is indeed a "learned attitude." These are peddled in among other ways, through unathoritative kinds of postcolonial and colonial literary presentations of the Asian African community in East Africa with which Vassanji seems to differ.[87]

It is not a far-fetched view to suggest that the failure to contextualise the Asian African experience or community gives rise to what Seidenberg

terms "a fit of historical amnesia" implicit in stereotypical views held by indigenous and "White Africans" in East Africa.[88] The racialist tendency to conceptualise the East African cultural experience, past and present as being fixedly "Black" or "White" is a kind of Manichaeism that we must unlearn, as I have argued elsewhere.[89] Stereotypes and xenophobic attitudes towards Asian African community in general and Asian African writers in particular, fail to appreciate the systematic and racist manner in which the present status and state of the community was made through the racialist colonial policies, machinations, and structures. Needless to say that the community's own cultural difference and inherent social exclusivity have only served to exacerbate their plight and position as a racially distinct East African migrant community.

The logic informing British cultural engineering in the colonial era in East Africa is interesting. They created a monadic, homogeneous White Self and a Janus-like "two-faced" Asian African/indigenous African Other. Then, at different moments and when it suited their needs, the British empowered one face of this ambivalent Other, offered it authority over the *other* Other thus distracting/allaying critical attention from itself as the colonial Self observing the reign of one Other over another Other.

Firstly, it was the Asian African Other that had the upper hand, but this was not only *transitional* but also *translational.* This is because finally at independence, the situation turned in favour of the indigenous African Other with the White Self transferring authority permanently to the Black Other. The consequence was the translation of Othering of the Brown Other into what Shiva Naipaul has called "the eternal other" in the post-colonial power equation. [90] This sense of an eternal Otherness is what puzzles Majid

in one of Kuldip Sondhi's plays when he asks, "I was a second-class citizen under the British. Am I to remain a second class citizen under the African (read indigenous African) government as well?"[91]

The failure or refusal to comprehend the politics of interstitiality as an emasculating colonial logic within East Africa's colonial discourse analyses, indeed amounts to what Frantz Fanon classified as "intellectual laziness" in the native and Black Africans. Ethnocentric and nativist politicians and writers who remain embroiled in the very Manichean logic that they purport to be challenging.[92]

From the foregoing discussion, it appears the limitations that militate against the conceptualisation of the Asian African community as an integral part of the East African culture can be surmounted. This may be done through what Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean call, "Unlearning One's Privilege as One's Loss"—one of the major themes in postcolonial theory. They cite Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a leading postcolonial theorist, who argues:

> If *we can learn racism, we can unlearn it,* and unlearn it precisely because our assumptions about race represent a closing down of creative possibility, a loss of [O]ther options, [O]ther knowledge...Unlearning one's privilege by considering it one's own loss constitutes a double recognition. Our privileges, whatever they may be in terms of race, class, nationality, gender, and the like, may have prevented us from gaining a certain kind of [O]ther knowledge that we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social positions. *To unlearn one's privilege means, on the other one hand, to do our homework, to work hard at gaining some knowledge of the others who occupy those spaces most closed to our privileged view. On the other hand, it means attempting to speak to others in such a way that they might take us seriously and most important of all be able to answer back. Doing one's homework in the interest of unlearning one's privilege marks the beginning of an ethical relation to the Other.*[93] (Emphasis added.)

This chapter specifically and indeed the entire study in general should be read as such an unlearning process where we can learn the nature of East Africa's racially plural colonial past with respect to Asian African writers and

their works. Our argument above urge critics to desist from treating, East Africa, what is probably an African region rife with racial heterogeneity as if it is a region formed out of a unity of racial homogeneity. There is a need for a reformulation.

2.5. Conclusion

The discussions in this chapter, offer a plausible way out of our racialised Othering mindset. According to Bhabha, revisionary postcolonial voices such as MG Vassanji's will no longer need to address their strategies of opposition to a horizon of 'hegemony' that is envisaged as horizontal and homogenous.[94] On the contrary, they will have to articulate their own narratives well aware of the fact that there are many colonialisms and not just one Colonialism.

The absence of ethnic prejudice, racialist aesthetic lenses and postcolonial nativism should be the prerequisite for the right appraisal of literatures of East Africans of South Asian heritage as a cultural sequence in the complex pattern that is the Asian African condition in East Africa through history. From such a *post*-colonial standpoint, not only can we view the postcoloniality in East African narratives by Asian African writers such as Vassanji from Bhabha's postcolonial perspective, but we can also find reasoned responses to M. C. Finn's question, what happens "when the Other is Another Other?"[95]

In the following chapter, we now narrow our focus to a contrapuntal reading of Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*. The focus of the next chapter is an appreciation of how Vassanji's consciousness of the Asian African experience in East Africa affects the treatment of his fictional settings. We

are interested in appreciating how his imaginative settings in themselves as aspects of his novels can be interpreted by a postcolonial reader. The discussions will mainly centre on *The Gunny Sack* but also where need be; reference to *The Book of Secrets* will be made.

CHAPTER THREE

IMAGINED (DIS)LOCATIONS: VASSANJI AND THE POETICS OF INTERSTITIAL SETTINGS

> I do not know very much about the Asian community, but I think they are also affected by the land. It is more than material; it is not just because of its economic possibilities, it is something almost akin to spiritual.
>
> Ngugi wa Thiong'o[1]

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we focus on how MG Vassanji imaginatively treats his settings as aspects of the novels especially, *The Gunny Sack*.[2] Setting or location, in this chapter has been taken to have a three-fold meaning. Namely, locations as the landscapes of the novel, locations as descriptive metaphors and locations as the motive or thematic backdrops. The argument of the chapter is that by appreciating the importance of setting a finer appreciation of the unique interstitial situation of the Asian Africans of East Africa as imagined by Vassanji can be achieved.

Before proceeding, let us try to understand how the idea of an interstitial space functions in serving the objective of this chapter. In terms of a geographical description, an interstitial space is likely to manifest itself as a borderland; a land which is neither here nor there but in-between. It is in this sense that we will be using the terms 'interstitial space' and 'borderlands' synonymously. This designation of the interstitial locations or settings of Vassanji's novels as 'borderlands' is an important discursive strategy in reading the selected novels, especially *The Gunny Sack*.

Neither quite homeland, nor a perpetuation of origin, borderlands allude to a productive location identified by its promises and problems, especially to an economically motivated migrant community. The borderland-concept refracts the multiplicity and dynamism of Asian African experience in East Africa. When seen as a borderland between South Asia and latter-day (re)locations such as North America and Europe, East Africa to the Asian Africans is a diasporic terrain in which Asian African characters live in-between in an ambivalent world comprising their own heritage, that of East Africa and that of the West. East Africa then stands as that region that is home and not home, the place where all the contradictions of living among and between worlds manifest itself in the lives and experience of the Asian African community as Vassanji interprets it.[3]

Guided by the idea of land, which Ngugi points out as being crucial to all the East Africa peoples, we assert that most of the settings of Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and the *Book of Secret* are interstitial locations. Actually, it will be argued here that locations that are usually not ones ancestral homes almost always tend to be interstitial. Kikono, Matamu, Msimanzi, precolonial Zanzibar, Dar, Moshi, colonial Nairobi and generally-speaking East Africa as a location all these specifically different but generically similar and related scenes inhabited by Asian Africans have a common denominator they are all interstitial locations or simply in-between spaces. Homi Bhabha points out:

> These 'in-beween' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself...It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural values are negotiated.[4]

Hence we can interrogate various aspects of how Vassanji treats his settings in *The Gunny Sack* as locations where Asian Africans negotiate their sense of self and belonging. But first, a brief outline of the novel as a way of familiarising the reader.

3.2. *The Gunny Sack*: A Synopsis

The Gunny Sack, Vassanji's first novel, celebrates the spirit of early Asian migrants from India who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. Living under German colonial rule, the family of Dhanji Govindji become permanent residents of Africa while witnessing historical events that result in the birth of African nationalism. In this novel, Vassanji focuses on the problematic union of East Africa and South Asia. The tensions arising from con tact between the two lands is captured mostly in the characters who migrated from India to East Africa in search of Other homes. It is this quest for new homes that we see most of the Asian African characters such as Dhanji Govindji and his descendant Salim Juma in this novel embark on.

The main story is told by Salim Juma who is bequeathed a gunny sack by his mystical grand aunt, Ji Bhai. It is a sack full of mementos, each item revealing a chapter in the story of his family. The novel is both the story of one extended family's arrival and existence in East Africa as well as a repository for the collective memory and oral history of many other Asian Africans.

In the first section of the novel Dhanji Govindji arrives in Matamu in present-day Tanzania— from Zanzibar, Porbander, and ultimately Junapur in North-Western India— and has a son, Husein, with an African slave

homeland in Junapur and locating oneself in the East African coast is significant. It was to be the initial step in the troublesome quest to belong that future generations of Govindji's family such as Salim Juma were to face.

It is interesting that the same quest for new homelands that were more promising in terms of prosperity was to be Govindji's downfall. There are insinuations in the novel (TGS 44) that he had used monies drawn from public coffers for personal needs without consulting other faithfuls. This independence of mind was the one that had enabled him to journey in a dhow across the Indian Ocean to Jongbar, or Zanzibar. It is the same independence of mind, characteristic of migrants and possessed by Govindji's later descendants, like the narrator Salim Juma as we shall see later on this chapter.

The Second part of the novel is named after Govindji's granddaughter, Kulsum. She married Juma, Husein's son and is the mother of *The Gunny Sack*'s main narrator, Salim Juma. We learn of the older Juma's childhood as a second-class member of his stepmother's family after his mother, Moti, dies. At this time, the family of Govindji has mushroomed into various related families of cousins, and siblings. The late Juma Husein's family has emigrated again from Tanzania to Kenya in colonial Nairobi.[5] After his wedding to Kulsum there is a long wait in the unloving bosom of his stepfamily for their first child, Begum. It is the 1950s, and whispers are beginning of the Mau Mau rebellion. A segment of the novel addresses itself to a description of these troubled times of rising African nationalism.

When Juma Husein dies in Nairobi, his family of Kulsum with her children including young Salim Juma, the narrator, moves back to Dar es

Salaam. And gradually Kulsum's son Salim Juma, Govindji's grandchild, takes over *The Gunny Sack's* narration from his mother, recalling his own childhood. His life guides the narrative from here on.

He remembers his mother's store and neighbours' intrigues, the beauty of his pristine English teacher, Miss Penny (later Mrs Gaunt) at primary school in colonial Dar, cricket matches, and attempts to commune with the ghost of his father. It is a vibrantly described, deeply felt childhood. Tanzania where the family lives, meanwhile, is racked by racialist political tensions on its road to independence, which comes about as Salim Juma reaches adolescence. With the surge in racial tension and nationalist rioting, several members of his close-knit community leave the country under feelings of rising unhomeliness and go in search of other new homes in England, the United States, and Canada.

The third part of the novel is named after the African girl Amina; Salim Juma's great unfulfilled love. He meets Amina while doing his National Service at Camp Uhuru, a place he feels he has been sent to in error. This is so because the National Service was a prerequisite for joining University. Due to their exclusivity and unpredictable future as a migrant community, most Asian African families would go a long way to make their children go to National Service Camps near Dar es Salaam where the core of the community lived. But Salim's name Juma, an African name, and his dark complexion due to his ancestry from Binti Taratibu could not convince the recruitment officers that he was not an indigenous African.

In spite of pleas from his family, he was sent to the farthest National Service Camp in northern Tanzania where he was the only Asian African amidst many indigenous African colleagues. This exposure was a blessing in

disguise as it forged his African sense of self, only for it to be betrayed later in the novel, when he was persecuted on racial grounds by the Tanzanian government...because he was of Asian extraction.

While at the Camp Uhuru, Salim develops an intimate relationship with Amina. Amina is an indigenous African, and their relationship inevitably causes his family anxiety, until the increasingly militant Amina leaves for New York after the national youth training. Salim becomes a teacher at his old school in independent Dar, and marries an Asian African, but keeps a place for Amina in his heart and in fact names his daughter Amina. When the older Amina returns from the United States, where she had turned into a radical human rights activist, she is arrested by the increasingly repressive independent Tanzanian government.

Due to his close acquaintance with Amina, Salim is hurriedly exiled abroad on safety grounds. He leaves his Asian African wife and daughter with the promise that he will send for them, knowing that he will not. The novel ends with dejected Salim alone in a basement of a flat somewhere in Canada, the last memories coming out of a gunny sack he inherits, hoping that he will be his family-line's last migrant. His wish is captured in the last paragraph of the last chapter of *The Gunny Sack*. It reads:

> The running must stop now, Amina. The cycle of escape and rebirth, uprooting and regeneration, must cease in me. Let this be the last runaway, returned, with one last, quixotic dream. Yes, perhaps here lies redemption, a faith in the future, even if it means for now to embrace the banal present, to pick up the pieces of our wounded selves, our wounded dreams, and pretend they're still intact, without splints, because from our wounded selves flowers still grow. We had our dreams, Little One, we dreamt the world, which was large and beautiful and exciting, and it came to us this world, even though it was more than we bargained for, it came in large soaking waves and wrecked us, but we are thankful, for to have dreamt was enough. And so, dream, Little Flower... (TGS, 268-269)

The question that we should ask ourselves is: Is Vassanji's choice of this imaginative scene as a concluding part of *The Gunny Sack* a matter of chance or is it a conscious discursive strategy that makes the reader reflect on the dislocated experience of the Asian Africans of East Africa over historical time? Is exiled Salim the product of the locations he occupied or rather his community occupied as a migrant people in East Africa?

3.3. Mythical Locations, Sites of Interstitiality

The answer to the reflection above may arise out of a further sampling of Govindji's originary story in the first part of the novel, in the very beginning with the story of Salim's progenitor, Dhanji Govindji. In one particular instance, reminiscing about how he came to East Africa, Govindji tells his African-born daughter-in-law Ji Bhai:

> As you approach it [Africa] from the sea, as you enter the harbour, you see to the right all those beautiful, white buildings of the Europeans...behind this beautiful, white European face of the town is our modest Indian district, every community in its own separate area, and behind that the African quarters going right into the forest. (TGS, 29)

One might argue that the segregationist layout of the imagined nineteenth-century Dar owes much to the encroaching European imperial force in East Africa of that time, but we should be aware of the politics that the writer is advancing in this respect. Our view is that there is a way in which the descriptions and imaginings of locations influence the rest of the story or story line in Vassanji's texts. By demarcating the land into three and situating the Asian in-between the African and the Whites, Vassanji is playing out his commitment as a historical translator but is also doing other things as well.

For instance, we could argue that the writer appears to be hinting that the racialist consciousness adopted by many Asian Africans in his novel, such as Govindji and his descendants emerged from an already determined society divided on racial grounds by the White imperialists. Through Govindji's story, we note that the imagined geography or setting has an influence on the inner conscience of its inhabitants. In other words, the description of the Asian Africans interstitial location in the Zanzibar that Govindji emigrated to sets pace to similar interstitiality in other locations later in the novel. When we view Vassanji' settings as modes for character-development, or what we call subjectification in the subsequent chapter, then we notice that most of Vassanji's Asian African characters such as Govindji and his great-grandson Salim are shaped by the settings that they occupy and inhabit.

On one plane, settings as locations in the novels of M. G. Vassanji provide a narrative and descriptive background for the dramatic casting of his social concerns. It also goes further to enable him develop his characters, plot and storyline. To grasp this formal function of setting, we must look beyond the individual cases of the various settings such as Kikono, Dar, Tanga, Zanzibar, Matamu, and imagine them in their generic sense as borderlands. In other words, the basic thread that runs through all these varied settings appears to be their characteristic as interstitial locations where Asian African subjects and their experiences render them so.

Reading Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* constantly alerts one to the particular attention or alertness to detail that he offers in 'setting up' his fictional locations where the narration plays itself out. Although one can

argue that this is a typical feature of any realistic novel, it should be noted that the author in this case comes from a unique community as already argued. Therefore, we find it logical to conclude that setting in the narratives of M. G. Vassanji are nuanced and carry nuances of the unique experiences of the Asian Africans as an interstitial community in East Africa. At the very outset of *The Gunny Sack*, an examination of the settings reveals that they convey a certain sense of in-betweeness, especially when seen from the perspective of the Asian Africans of East Africa.

Take the example of the place Matamu, a fictional location somewhere in present-day Tanzania, especially as described in the following passage:

> Ma-tamu. The name always had a tart sound to it, an aftertaste to the sweetness, a far off echo that spoke of a distant, primeval time, the year zero. An epoch that cast a dim but sombre shadow present. It is the town where my forebear unloaded his donkey one day and made his home. Where Africa opened its womb to India and produced a being who forever stalks the forest in search of himself. (TGS, 39-40)

We can read the sense of ambivalence that is in the offing when the two cultural worlds of Africa and India meet; the being formed from this union is charged with the relentless quest of trying to find its own true meaning. The fact that this mixture leads to the emergence of beingness is one that we may want to consider awhile.

It is possible to see the new being mentioned above as being one that imbibes from both its *Indianness* and *Africanness* at the same time. This is so especially when we recognise that Matamu is cast as a mythical experience. Vassanji seems to suggest that when one exists in between several cultures, it is necessary for him/her to have a distinguishing identity; in this case an in-between sense of being. This sense of being can

be rationalised in form of setting as is the case with Dhanji Govindji's description of the Africa he emigrated to (TGS 29) or on the basis of racialism.

In *The Gunny Sack*, colour becomes important and the characters seem to draw their identities on this basis. The following cosmogonic myth offered to Salim by his mother Kulsum attests to this fact.

> When God was well and ready after all his exertions finally to create mankind, he sat himself besides a red-hot oven with a plate of dough. From this he fashioned three identical dolls. He put the first doll into the oven to finish it, but, alas, brought it out too soon: it came out white and undone. In this way was born the white race. With this lesson learnt, the Almighty put the second doll into the oven, but this time he kept it in for too long. It came out burnt and black. Thus the black race. Finally the One and Only put the last doll inside the oven, and brought it out just the right time. It came out golden brown, the Asian, simply perfect. (TGS Pp. 73)

Mythological attempts at understanding the phenomenon of, and privileging interstitiality such as the one cited above serve two functions in Vassanji's novels. Firstly they can be seen as a justification and therefore recognition of the implicit sense of interstitiality that characterises the Asian African experience. Secondly, it can also point to the privilege and value of the interstitial location bestowed upon the Asian African people by divine forces so as to give them a sense of superiority. Whatever the case may be, the idea of interstitiality is intertwined with all the politics of belonging that are advanced in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*.

That is why Kulsum invokes the above-cited myth to explain the politics of colour and belonging to her sons Salim and Sona. They are reminded as individuals that they occupy the same space as their forefather whom they relate to in two ways. This is by way of skin colour and cultural identity and by way of the interstitial location they occupy in-between the Black and White races of their world. We pursue this line of thought further

in the next chapter where we follow the plight of the community through the person of one of the characters.

Apart from the subtleties of colonial fiat and segregationist policy, racialised space is the signifying marker of the interstitial sense of the Asian Africans within the African diaspora. This space and its discontinuities issue the sense of being that is reflective of its origin therefore interstitial. A terrain that refuses the classification of either/or and champions a new space of re-articulation which may be called the "in-between-both" space as occupied by for instance Sona and Salim in *The Gunny Sack*.

This "idea of interstitiality" seems to be the basic idea around which the whole novel revolves. Even the main characters such as the narrator Salim get their names according to this theory. "Thus our nicknames: Sona for the golden boy, the youngest and favourite, my brother, Jamal; Kala for the one who came between Salim, Salum in Swahili, the overdone..." (TGS 74). The sense of being that Vassanji portrays for all the characters comes from this theory of discrimination.

Perhaps through this observation, Vassanji draws our attention not only to circumstances under which Asian Africans developed their interstitiality but also to the fact they have lost their sense of a secure identity, theirs is now an identity of the in-between space, an identity that does not make sense in a world interpreted in manichean terms of Black or White. Salim and his like now have to adopt and adapt to an atmosphere of an unknown, unfamiliar environment that is East Africa after independence.

It is in this imagined in-betweeness seen as a kind of landscape inhabited by the unhomely selves of Asian Africans that setting becomes a site of dislocation. As Ngugi has rightly pointed out, land questions not only

beguile whites and blacks in East Africa but even the Asian Africans. Ngugi says that settings do have spiritual values. This is credible if we look at the ways in which land has been used as a site for the interstitial nature of Asian African experience.

Take Zanzibar—the original Asian African settlement in East Africa—for instance. The notion of Zanzibar/Jongbar as a powerful site in demystifying the Coolie-Myth discussed in the previous chapter is very crucial. Without it the Asian African experience in East Africa, is incomplete. It is the presence of the ancestors of present-day Asian Africans in Zanzibar even before the British set their foot on East African shores that justifies the beingness of East Africans of Asian descent. In other words, by invoking a pre-colonial migration and settlement, Vassanji is able to articulate a certain politics of belonging in that Asian Africans are seen as historically-rooted peoples borne out of the historical antecedents of the region maybe just like any other East African community.

Zanzibar is a primary location in the complete articulation of the Asian African experience as captured by Vassanji's novels. As a site of self-definition and an interstitial space, Zanzibar represents the point of convergence where migrant experience breeds ambivalent subjecthoods and subject-positions as is evident in the experience of Salim Juma. It is a site of tension and dispossession, a realm of discontinuities, as we see in te various images of it at the beginning and end of *The Gunny Sack*. In the first chapters, it is reified as that lost home where order and prosperity thrived. In the last chapters of the same novel, Zanzibar is painted as an unhomely interstitial space that was rocked by racialist upheavals of the post-independence epoch. Again a particular scene from the novel attests to this

fact. This is in the last paragraph of the last chapter in *The Gunny Sack* mentioned above (TGS, 268-269)

Salim Juma, the narrator who now lives as an exile in Canada, utters these words. He is just one of the droves of Asian Africans who left East Africa after independence for Britain, Canada and United States (rarely India). After the migration of his forbearer, Dhanji Govindji from Junapur in India to Zanzibar; after the migration of his family from Tanzania to Kenya then back to Tanzania and finally after this migration to Canada, Salim is tired and exhausted by the perpetual feelings of unhomeliness and impossibility of belonging.

Salim's words touch on the points of rupture in the articulation of Asian African subjectivity and experience. It appears that the reclamation of his subjectivity through his keen memory offers an agency or propulsion into an empowered self-definition and self-knowledge, which is one of the key areas of focus in postcolonial discourse. The exiled space from where he reminisces is actually a location of dislocation. In the sense that it is a space that provides the situation and location of culture crucial to the articulation and creation of Asian African experience.

Sometimes, it takes exile for one to make judgements and assessments of one's own homeland. Salim's Toronto basement from where he narrates his story to the reader as a realm that resounds with the pressures of dislocation such as want, discomfort and nostalgia. Yet, interestingly, his story also speaks of certain pleasures of dislocation focus, relief and the possibility of dreaming another future...again. It is this line of thought that Bhabha appears to be grappling with when he says, "the recesses of the domestic space become sites for histories most intricate

invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and the world, become confused, and uncannily, the private and the public becomes part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is divided and disorientating."[6]

East Africa, seen from the exile location from where Salim Juma speaks, is not just a recess of the domestic space, but also an excess of that same space. It is excess in the sense that much as Salim and other Asian Africans who flee the region after independence may want to forget it and forge on they may never be able to do so. They, in one way or another carry the region with them as an excess space within their minds that keeps being visited in nostalgic or bitter moments of remembering. In this way, Salim Juma is like Vassanji who says that no matter where he goes, he carries the East African world with him, indeed within him.

Narration therefore becomes an important avenue that links the exile condition of the Asian Africans and the interstitial experiences of the community that they left behind. When that re-membering is infused as a narrative device as Vassanji does in *The Gunny Sack,* then this novel becomes a setting for identity-formation. The novel becomes a space full of instances of interstitiality and its attendant mentalities such as unhomeliness. These instances are not only gestural but communicative acts as well. They demonstrate how Vassanji relies on his removed position as an East African writer from the Asian African community how living in Canada, a space removed from the vicissitudes of the experienced sense of in-betweeness.

It is in this sense that Salim Juma's remarkable memory can be seen as a symbolic space where the re-membering of the dislocated Asian African to his East African experience is performed. This re-membering includes

finding the significance of ancestral genesis and genealogy. It also includes constructing and reconstructing broken personal and communal historical moments and memories. Such a reconstruction of one's story of belonging is inevitably tied to the theatres of action that led to the dislocated status. In that respect and as symbolic spaces, Zanzibar, Kikono and Msimbazi, Matamu are fictional worlds of the beings that merge from them, the Asian Africans. They also symbolise the existence of order before disruption and the imagined, originary moment when fear and unhomeliness were imagined as non-existent.

3.4. Setting as Metaphor of Dislocation

Under this section, we concern ourselves with seeing the figurative behind the literal. We will see that Vassanji's settings normally have many interpretations. This critical stance the realism in the works of the writer because it creates a certain atmosphere that is supportive to the meta-textual politics that he seeks to advance.

For instance, Vassanji argues throughout *The Book of Secrets* that settings such as Kikono could also be locations where cultural difference or politics are played out at a micro and macro level. Here is an illustration drawn from Corbin's perception of Mombasa when he first arrived from Europe, to take up a colonial administrative post:

> A sight that even then he knew he would never forget. The coast of Africa, the harbour of Mombasa. Its modesty, the composed exoticism of its orientalness, stayed with you like the strong lines of a deceptively simple masterwork. White houses shimmered on a hill rendered green with vegetation. A fringe of palm trees decorated the shoreline, a white road came up to the beach where a restless waving crowd awaited.., (TBS, 12)

Now Vassanji may well be describing the colonial gaze on Africa and its "orientalising" effect. But he could also be talking about something different here that we need to pay attention to. It should not be lost to us that Corbin is received at Mombasa, an African setting by an *Indian* guide, is checked at the immigration by *Indian* officers and cleared by an *Indian* clerk. (TBS, 14)

If we pay attention to this point without necessarily being carried away by the metaphoricity implicit in *The Book of Secrets* opening scene then a certain argument can be imagined. It seems more than the fact that the writer satirises the British or colonial pre-occupation with the geography of Africa or its geographical detail that in a way uncovers his colonial desires to possess it. What is of interest is that it is the Asian African who welcomes Corbin—the embodiment of British colonialism or imperialism (TBS, 7). The idea of the Asian African as functionary in the colonisation of East Africa is not hidden to the reader.

Vassanji says that much as we are aware of the whimsical Western fascination with exotic geographies "South of the equator" we may also want to be aware that next to the beauty captured in fine and picturesque descriptions, which juries of the various prizes won by Vassanji seem to hinge on, the gruesome fact that the Indian figure played an historical role in the setting up of imperial order in East Africa is significant. This fact is amplified further when we interrogate the Euro-Asian relationships of that formative time through yet another illustration:

> 'I am giving you advice, Bwana Gulam. Take your family a few kilometres inland, move to some town there until the war is over, or danger from the sea is past.'
>
> 'Will the British Manuari attack Matamu?'
>
> 'They could attack Matamu from the sea, or they could land troops here and march to Dar es Salaam. Tell the other Indians what I have said. If the British attack, the Africans can run to the bushes, but where will you run? (TGS, 48)

In this illustration, the German colonial official, Bwana Wasi (Weiss) meets with the Mukhi of Matamu, Dhanji Govindji's son Gulam. He enlightens Gulam as to the ambiguous position of his Asian African community.

While the Germans are at war with the British and the Africans are divided into the two warring groups, the Asian Africans are the ones who do not belong. In the sense that the African is at his own home and the White men have power at their disposal but the migrant Asian African community has neither of the two. In which case, the setting that is Matamu becomes a metaphor for the community's inbetweeness. It becomes reflective of the intricate milieu that is occupied by this community, which though migrant and economically stable lacks political power to control their own destiny. This fact becomes clear as one sifts through the following chapters of *The Gunny Sack*.

Vassanji employs interstitial settings such as Matamu as a formal device in the overall narrative structure of *The Gunny Sack*. It is with this organising tool that he manages to make landscapes, character, and framatic actions imbricated aspects of the Asian African world. Having been raised in such interstitial locations himself, first knowledge of these coastal borderlands and their mythologies is something which lends his descriptions and characters credibility as we shall see in the next chapter. Description combines with image. The evocative nature help realise the limitless choice of venue and power wielded with a detailed and keenly-felt description. He has imbued in readers a sense of isolation, sorrow, and violence simply by choosing telling scenes/settings; interstitial or borderland settings.

The tendency to create settings that are then described in metaphorical language assists Vassanji to invoke the idea of dilemma in his readers' mind. Although choice of setting normally depends on characters and story, Vassanji's are effective in themselves. Knowledge of his setting is part and parcel of knowledge of his characters and thematic concerns, as we shall demonstrate in the next chapter.

It appears that the Asian African characters in Vassanji's novels are in one way or the other locked in an intimate desire to find their own roots out of and in Africa. This quest for a sense of belonging at the space that is the interstice or interstitial setting leads a migratory self like Salim's through space [and Govindji's through place] as they both seek to reconnect with their African heritage. They sift through memory and, as Salim confesses, history. Salim tells the better part of *The Gunny Sack* from his dislocated location of exile by metaphorically acknowledging that, "in our catalogue of names, where history moves in a noisy parade wearing faces like masks." (TGS, 60)

It is interesting to notice that his great-grandfather before him had also embarked on a physical journey in search for *his* African roots in the form of his prodigal mixed-race son Huseni, who had special affiliations with indigenous Africans and had woken up one day and just disappeared into the heart of Africa. What is of special note here, is that Vassanji makes Govindji's quest to come to nought as he spends all his life savings together with his community's resources and that under his trusteeship as the Mukhi [headman] of Matamu an act that leads to his cold-blooded murder.

Is Vassanji saying that the search for an originary past that can reconnect us to our bases is a rather whimsical venture reminiscent of

Govinji's unswerving yet belated attempts? Especially when we mark the following words, "There is no sin greater, no shame deeper. But Dhanji Govindji, for the sake of his half-African son, committed it; dipped into community funds when his own savings run dry, to pay his numerous informants and agents, to finance his quest."(TGS, 54)

We should pay attention to the metatext of the weighty words above. It is true that Govinji committed an atrocious deed all in quest for his son. But it is also true that the half-African son had become not just an obsession in his life but also a meaning. It is Husseni, his son by his own slave-wife Binti Taratibu who connected him or gave him roots in Africa. This point, Vassanji argues is the one that we should pay attention to most. That the migrant goes to extraordinary levels to try and both justify and own his roots to a given space or locale. The key to such an interpretation lies in the preliminary suggestion that we offered at the beginning of this study. We argued that indeed space or location is intimately related or linked to the character, and even sense of self of the migrant. It is gives him his *raison d etre.*

Perhaps the most overt use of setting as metaphor comes out when we consider the metaphoricity invested in the description of Kikono as the colonial Administrator Alfred Corbin feels it:

> The nights were cold and dry, the blackness so absolute, so palpably dense he felt if he reached out a hand where he slept he could pull it aside and let in the lighted world of London, Paris, and Hamburg. The mbuyu tree rustled outside; in the distance was the cackle of hyenas, the grunt of a leopard or hog, the constant crick-crick of insects. Sometimes there would be the maddening, eerie pelting of rain on the roof, a sound which should have been welcome in this semi-desert. He had heard of the spirits resident in mbuyu trees and naturally had ridiculed the idea, but in this menace-filled darkness, in this loneliness, all one's scientific objectivism seemed vulnerable. He knew it to be four o'clock when the rich and rising cry of the brave muezzin rallied against the thick darkness. Such a desolate cry of the human soul in the vast universe. (TBS, 52)

The metaphoricity invoked by the descriptive language supplied in this excerpt is again a hall-mark of Vassanji's remarkable imagination which is capable of painting vignettes of African landscapes as if they are photographs being perceived through the visual sense. But apart from just serving the role of setting, this language is able to evoke in the reader the imagined harshness of the environment where a number of harsh things are set to happen.

By so doing the writer is able to argue his case that before we judge the characters of the novels by the actions that they commit let us be keen also to judge the environment that produces them. This remains one of the key concerns of Vassanji's writings and indeed the writings of many Asian African writers who always argue a case for the situational influences on the characters of the Asian African peoples.

3.5. Setting as Motive

When the setting in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* are seen as motives, they serve to advance and enhance Vassanji's thematic concerns. In most cases, setting as a motive in Vassanji's fiction supplies illustrations of the implication of interstitial locations or borderlands in the experience of the Asian Africas. Experience points to acquisition of knowledge through the experiential dimension of understanding and interpreting the environment in which we live.

To talk of experiences is to talk of consciousness of reality. However, we must remember that Asian African experiences are formed out of a politics of difference. The Asian African characters in the two novels

articulate Vassanji's own intuitive experience of the Asian African condition in East Africa as he experienced it and life through his sensibilities, his imagination, so we experience in the two novels and live through them, to a degree, as Pipa and Vassanji lived through them. On this plane, these works cease to be an inscription of reality or a philosophical lesson drawn from observation of a certain reality, and become an aspect of reality itself.

Such realisation means essentially coming into a consciousness of reality that transcends that consciousness given by the five senses and the mind (rationalism and empiricism). It is therefore indescribable or attended to at the experiential level. This reality is recognised as permanent while all that senses experience passes away. One who has this realisation is surer and more aware of that existence than of contents of sensory experience.

For instance, sometimes Vassanji employs setting as the climactic environment of the human psyche launched into a troubled journey of self-definition in the vast space of human lives. On such occasion, the space of difference becomes the site where the historical and aesthetic realities converge. The real and the imaginary are intertwined in a creative process and the sites of tension become the setting where the Asian African lives. This is exactly seen when Salim is sent to the national Youth Service as a prerequisite to his joining the University of Dar es Salaam.

Salim, dark because of his links to his indigenous African grandmother, Binti Taratibu, was sent away to a Tabora youth training camp where he was the only Tanzanian of Asian origin. In this borderland in the North of Tanzania, Salim is able to translate his life's misfortune into a positive reality. He, for instance, discovers kinship ties and makes friends with indigenous Africans whom he comes to understand through

interaction. He makes the following realisation:

> A few weeks later, with new insight gained, with the help of a metaphor: 'We Indians have barged into Africa with our big black trunk, and every time it comes in our way. Do we need it? I should have come with a small bag, a rucksack. Instead I came with ladoos, jelebis and chevdo. Toilet paper. A woolen suit. And I carried them on my head like a fool...Thus began the parting of ways. (TGS, 204)

Here, the narrator of *The Gunny Sack* is talking about his own baggage, carried to the training camp. Using his experience as an allegory to that of Asian Africans, Salim argues that he needed not to have carried all his "Indianness" with him when going to the camp. Whereas his colleagues had just carried a rucksack of necessities, knowing the harsh life they were going to, Salim had been given a huge metallic barge carrying all Indian artefacts, from eatables, clothes, mementoes, medicine et cetera.

Somewhere between Dar and Tabora, they could not use a vehicle and walk. Salim had to endure the pains and challenges of carrying his big, black box on his head as his colleagues laughed at his predicament. Salim then queries the rationale behind carrying boxes of Indian attitudes, mentalities and prejudices from India to Africa that only serve to put Asian Africans at odds with Africa.

Vassanji suggests borderlands or interstitial spaces, such as Salim's transitional training between High School and University in the ancient northern Tanzanian town of Tabora, as spaces where transformations in worldview can take place. Cultures are seen not as static entities with a certain fixity to them, but as cultures-in-transit. Asian African culture-in-transit becomes the representation of the last forte of self-hood, the embodiment of the absent homeland that allows a space of belonging between India and Africa.

This is especially evident in Chapter Fifteen of *The Gunny Sack* entitled "Red Skies and Western Eyes." This chapter is a vivid account of the plight of Asian Africans immediately after Independence in East Africa. In both novels the last chapters prefigure that climax and summary. Factors leading up to the slow and sure death of Pipa and the dispersal of the Asian African community point to a natural climax for the two narratives. In that death is contained a motive for all deaths that Vassanji's community faces. In fact, just as Vassanji informed us that Africa had extracted the price of life from Dhanji Govindji when he attempted to connect with her, so does Africa do with Nurmohamed Pipa. (TGS, 54) In his bid to belong to Africa, Pipa is rewarded with death in search of his African connection, his lost son by an African slave!

Vassanji is a tactful novelist. It could be possible by showing us that Africa is a "dark continent," a setting which has ill motives against its migrant and racially-different communities he challenges the underlying impetus of the so-called postcoloniality. This cynicism underlies the narrative flow of Vassanji's selected novels. For instance, his psychological approach to the consciousness of his narrators emphasises the exteriority of influences that make Asian Africans feel unhomely and interstitial more than interior influence.

If we take Pipa as an example, he is driven to his death not by his own biological or socio-cultural practices but by politically engineered economic forces that he cannot challenge. We dwell on this matter in greater detail in the next chapter. However one can argue that Vassanji's preoccupation with streams of consciousness may well be a strain of styles

used by exiled psychological novelists such as Joseph Conrad and James Joyce.[7]

His problematic representation of Africa as a cannibalistic space reveals its role as a strategic location for a critique of the socio-political contradictions of the post-colonial moment in East Africa. Pipa becomes a metaphor that serves to illustrate the vicissitudes of being a racially different minority in postcolonial Africa.

It is by reading both characters and the settings they occupy as indicative of the motive set forth by Vassanji that we can unlock various social concerns that he is raising. Thus the characters and space become intertwined in a creative process and the site of this tension becomes the "space of the characters". From this same stance, we can argue that it is not Africa that eliminates Govindji and Pipa in self-defence. That the two *dukawallah*-characters and their commercial proclivities could undermine the project that is self-determination and Uhuru in East Africa. Yet this line of thought too can hold. And this is the beauty of Vassanji's novels, which as Neloufer de Mel noticed:

> Vassanji's work is a dynamic site which lays bare the paradoxes, incompatibilities and ambivalences that are the central paradigms of migrant experience and discourse...The value of Vassanji's work lies precisely in the projections of how such hybridity, if at all, can never comprise an equal mixing of disparate strands. For identity is a site of negotiation which depends on the exigencies of situation, is always anchored to political, economic and cultural hegemony, and comes most unstuck at moments of crisis.[13]

This insight amplifies the tension evoked in *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. The two novels of Vassanji are seen here as metaphors of the ambivalent location of Asian Africans in East Africa, at least in a fictional sense, arising from histories of unhomeliness and dislocation. This is

especially the case when, as de Mel does, we read them as a common body or space that gestures to a disempowered history of a racially different minority African people.

This common body is a category based upon the perceptions assigned to the *disembodied* Asian African subject, whose body is just a metaphorical vehicle for its interior consciousness. This explains why Vassanji usually depicts inter-national migration, this type of movement across borders as bipolar. Asian African characters leave one contained and defined spatial territory, cross one or more borders, and arrive in another identifiable space.

Through the testimony of Salim Juma and Pius Fernandes, Vassanji appears to argue that in analysing these trans-national journeys, we should rely on the Asian Africans' motive for emigration. He seems to suggest that we should analyse both the movement and the outcome of the migration based on whether the migrant sees himself a "settler" or a "sojourner". In the former view, which is most prevalent in real life situations, Asian Africans descend from migrants who brought their culture with them and, after their arrival, refused to be assimilated in the prevailing cultural norms of the new nation [read African] territory. That is why we need to read his work with diaspora-specific frames of perceptions. These can make us make sense out of those uniquely Vassanjian characters such as Pipa who cross and question cultural, political, social, and national boundaries to explore new territories in-between.

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted a poetics of settings within *The Gunny Sack* with particular reference to the idea of interstitiality that Bhabha argues is a revealing angle of vision. If physical dislocation is one such angle of vision, then we can appreciate the fact that narration from an exile location makes the reader understand the Asian Africans' [in]ability to survive oppression, fragmentation and displacement as a migrant community in East Africa. For the Asian African as a community in-between many worlds borne out of the volatile union between East Africa and South Asia, the question of belonging becomes an important one.

Interstitial locations such as Matamu and racially stratified Dar es Salaam, as we have demonstrated, enable characters to move easily [fluidity of dislocation] across the borders of various countries that they see as composed of single geographical and cultural space. What underlies the power, vitality and compulsion of *The Gunny Sack* is the manner in which Vassanji innovatively makes it possible for his characters to be read as victims of the locations they occupy in East Africa over time. For instance, as an imagined location, Matamu becomes a setting that is not only a powerful background for, but also a metaphor for the dislocations that are experienced by the migrant community in *The Gunny Sack*.

CHAPTER FOUR

"DUKAWALLAH" AS A DISCURSIVE TROPE: READING STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT VIA NURMOHAMED PIPA

> My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.
>
> Homi Bhabha[1]

4.1. Introduction

The process of subjectification is a central concern of any critic interested in characters, their significance and/or character development in a postcolonial novel. In this chapter, we will invoke the term subjectification as being synonymous to character-development. We supply a critical reading of the intertextuality between the interstitial settings and Asian African subjectification in *The Book of Secrets*.[2] The discussion goes beyond just a reading of the "*dukawallah*" image of Nurmohamed Pipa as being either negative or positive and focuses on the development of Pipa as a character in *The Book of Secrets*.

4.2. *The Book of Secrets:* A Synopsis

MG Vassanji's novel, *The Book of Secrets* is yet another remarkable example of an Asian African writer's attempts to engage the ambivalent sense of being common to his people. The novel is an eloquent story of the diary of a colonial officer in East Africa, and the unravelling of its many secrets. It is the story of a stolen diary—a book of secrets—belonging to Alfred Corbin, a British governor of a small fictitious town, Kikono, on the borderland between Tanzania and Kenya.

Entries into the diary commence at the dawn of the twentieth-century as British imperialism was setting its roots in East Africa. Around the diary is woven the captivating story of a young Asian African, Nurmohamed Pipa and his mysterious wife Mariamu, as the forces of world history such as the First World War and African Nationalism break down their door. The effects of these happenings subsequently haunt three generations of Tanzanian Asian Africans beginning with Pipa's generation.

In *The Book of Secrets,* Vassanji tells a rich tale complete with historical dates and vivid descriptions of Asian African experience in East Africa from 1913 to 1988. He narrates from the perspective of a retired Dar es Salaam History teacher, Pius Fernandes who finds the old diary with one of his former students and reconstructs its story. The evolution of the Asian African community as a migrant people settled in East Africa is an important theme in *The Book of Secret.* The perseverance of Asian African characters such as Pipa and the attempts at making sense out of the geo-political tumult and social dynamics of change are also other narrative strands that woven into Vassanji''s thematic web.

The storyline of this novel is actually allegorical of Asian African personal and communal quests for success, stability and rootedness in the face of dramatic terrestrial machinations. Most of this narrative of *The Book of Secrets* is about the life experiences of one main character, Nurmohamed Pipa, on whom we place our focus in this chapter.

In telling his tale of both physical and emotional displacement, Vassanji demonstrates an easy familiarity with East Africa's history from 1913 to 1988. Indeed he uses Pius Fernandes, himself a long-serving History teacher in Dar es Salaam to narrate *The Book of Secret.* Whereas the

narrating voice is that of Fernandes, the main character of the novel is actually Nurmohamed Pipa. Vassanji develops Pipa as a *dukawallah* character. In other words, he is built around the colonial stereotype of the Asian African dukawallah, a conniving and popular figure in East African discourse, as argued in Chapter two. However, Pipa as a character is not developed in the way that Ngugi does Ramlagoon Dharamashah in *Petals of Blood* or Karen Blixen does Choleim Hussein in *Out of Africa*.[3]

Pipa is a *dukawallah* whose character development or subjectification must be seen in light of his historical experiences as a member of a migrant, racially-distinct Asian African community. We focus on Pipa not just because *The Book of Secrets* mainly revolves around his life experiences but also because as Bhabha notes, within postcolonial studies "the stereotype, which is [a] major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification..."[4] In keeping with Bhabha's view above we argue that the process of subjectification is evident in the process through which Asian Africans become interstitial peoples in East Africa. Consequently, we embark on retracing the process of character-development through the life and experiences of Nurmohammed Pipa, a metonym of the Asian African characters of Vassanji's novels.[5]

4.3. Pieces of Wood? On Fictional Stereotyping

In an early interview while a graduate student at the University of Leeds, Ngugi wa Thiong'o had the following to say in relation to stereotypical discourse in his literary practice:

> I tell you, this tendency is very very strong indeed, after being in that place in your country, you know, you might feel to justify your position and your

> people, and only say the odd things about them. Or necessarily take the other communities as mere illustrations of an attitude; when you take these characters from the Asian community, or the European community you might tend to use them as mere pieces of wood.[6]

As in the previous chapters, we reiterate the general presence of the *dukawallah*-stereotype as the face of Asian Africans in East African nations and narrations. This presence, just as Ngugi admits, serves the purpose of providing a kind of knowledge of the Asian African who, by and large, is an enigma to the Blacks and Whites alike. This is what Shiva Naipaul really meant when he observed the place of the Asian African in post-independence East Africa. He said, "nowadays, the Asian is portrayed as little more than a miserly *duka*-wallah who ceaselessly exploited and cheated innocent Africans. His past distorted, he is in the process of being eliminated from the present."[7]

However, it is a fact that Asian Africans are commonly or popularly known in East Africa as an entrepreneurial people with well-known commercial proclivities. These proclivities make the *dukawallah* figure the emblem or the figure-head of the Asian African peoples of East Africa. M. G. Vassanji appropriates and develops this popular mode of representation subsequently creating perhaps one of the keenest portraits of the *dukawallah* figures in East African literatures in the subject of Nurmohammed Pipa.

Pipa, a character who straddles both the narrative worlds of *The Gunny Sack, The Book of Secrets* and to some extent *Uhuru Street* is a typical *dukawallah* figure but with a difference. He is not fixed stereotypical in the sense of Blixen's Choleim or Ngugi's Ramlagoon. On the contrary, Pipa's

actions and character cannot be isolated by the contexts and spaces that make them logical human and meaningful ones.

Although it is impossible to ignore the widely acknowledged role of Asian Africans as a trading or entrepreneurial community in East Africa a crucial point must be acknowledged. Not all sub-communities within the larger Asian African community are traders, by tradition. The Goans, especially under the colonial governments in East Africa were known for their inclination towards civil service whereas the Khoja Ishmailis are well known for their commerce and industry. Vassanji and Pipa—by adoption—belong to the latter group whereas the narrator Pius Fernandes belongs to the former.

Interestingly, Vassanji's authority as a scribe of the *dukawallah* experience may partially draw from the fact that as a member of a trading community he understands the nature of the *dukawallah* in a very subtle way. This claim has validity within postcolonial criticism as issues of authority and where a writer draws it in terms of creativity and narration are important.[8] Otherwise how else can we argue that Vassanji's agency in the treatment of the *Dukawallah* is more authoritative than that of either Ngugi or Blixen?

We have argued in chapter two of this study that it takes an informed member of any community to offer meaningful agency to his or her community's interpretation of colonial experience in East Africa. This is one of the central tenets of the revisionist philosophy that underscores the creative and critical works definitive of postcolonial discourse as Bhabha has pointed out in his famous essay, "The Postcolonial and the Post-modern: Questions of Agency."[9]

In keeping with this line of postcolonial literary thought, Vassanji does not present us with Pipa as a stock character out of his social matrix and contextual locations that render him meaningful. On the contrary, he gives us a fuller and contextualised image of a human being with a life, a family, an origin, passions, ambitions, nightmares and challenges. The main difference between Pipa and other flat *Dukawallah* images in East African literatures is that he is cast in the ambivalence and ambiguity of the many worlds he occupies.

In Pipa, Vassanji creates an Asian African character who is not just a piece of wood but a "living" being caught in the webs and vicissitudes of his life as a colonial subject and a postcolonial citizen in East Africa. This is what Vassanji meant in the chapter two when he talked about his attempt to create a certain kind of East African Asian. His literary mission, seen in the creation of Pipa, is a mission to examine and illustrate the complex process that [in]forms the *dukawallah*-stereotype as a discursive strategy and as a form of knowing the Asian African as a shrewd and reptilian profit-seeker.

In the arguments that follow in this chapter, Nurmohamed Pipa is read as an authoritative symbolic vehicle that articulates the various discourses of power, marginality, diasporality, migrancy, and dispossession. By invoking such a concrete and familiar subjecthood as that of the *dukawallah,* Vassanji proceeds to implode the stereotype that has contributed to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the Asian African community in East Africa well defined by Naipaul above.[10]

The strategy of using a familiar and popular East African stereotype of the Asian African; the *dukawallah,* to undermine previous erroneous or

insufficient treatments of the same is crucial in two ways. Firstly, it ascertains that indeed postcolonial writers normally develop their artistic and social vision through re-casting known stereotypical subject-positions occupied by members of their communities. Secondly, it excites the possibility that stereotyped subjects such as Pipa are not only narrative agents but also politicised sites where crystallisations of the general cultural experiences of postcolonial writers occur.

This is why although the narrative worlds of *The Book of Secrets* is populated with many familiar Asian African figures such as women and men, children and adults, Muslim and Hindu, rich and poor, strong and weak, interstitiality appears to be an enduring principle in all these categories of being. Pipa is also a useful case in point because as Vassanji points out below, this character attains his fullest meaning within his community of other Asian African characters. Vassanji acknowledges that, "my stories are about individual characters, but they must be seen in the context of their community."[11]

It is convenient, for discursive purposes, to delineate the trajectory of Pipa's adventurous yet tumultuous life. This will be a means of illustrating the subjectification process by which Vassanji is able to create this authoritative image of the Asian African community and the interstitial sense with which it resonates. In which case we will recast, whilst illustrating, episodes of Pipa's development as an interstitial character.

Such a discursive stance has a danger to it. The original complex ways in which these episodes appear in Vassanji's novels will be compromised. He employs a sophisticated array of narrative styles and techniques ranging from foreshadowing, flashbacks, and narratives within

narratorial consciousness, digression, and historical imagination. This repertoire of narrative techniques is useful in his endeavour to capture the complex, ambivalent Asian African experience across temporal and spatial divides. However, there is a polemical benefit in our preferred approach. We can be able to read Pipa as a metonym of the rest of his community. We can also approach the experiences felt and lived by Pipa as coterminous to the national and socio-historical situations facing all the characters of Vassanji's worlds.

For instance, it is a deep sense of unhomeliness that makes the forefathers of Asian Africans such as Dhanji Govindji in *The Gunny Sack* to migrate from the borderlands of Cutch, Kathiawar and Punjabi. It is the same deep sense of unhomeliness that drives Pipa away from his borderland birthplace of Moshi in a human search for comfort and security elsewhere. It is still the same deep sense of unhomeliness that drives scores of post-Pipa generations of Asian Africans from the borderland that is postcolonial East Africa. East Africa is a borderland, a world in-between India and the new 'Asian African homelands' in North America and Western Europe. The similitude of the unhomeliness of the characters in the novels and in the actual circumstances that led Vassanji to self-exile out of East Africa is a uniting bond. A bond which makes the narratives of his stories credible accounts of the experience of his community.

Vassanji, in light of the foregoing, sees in his stereotype-characters such as Pipa in *The Book of Secrets* and Dhanji Govindji in *The Gunny Sack* more than pieces of wood which popularise attitudes to the majority Black East African societies and more. In these "pieces of wood" he perceives the archetypal commercial impetus that made India and East Africa to ever

make human contact. He actually perceives in the *dukawallah* the historical reason as to why and how Asian Africans came to be in the borderland that is East Africa in the first place. Vassanji pays attention to his subjects as spaces that disseminate certain knowledge. This is not simply the knowledge of the Asian African community with its alien and yet native character but also knowledge of the dynamics that inform human migration and migrant identities.

4.4. Mediating Intersitiality: On Pipa's Subjectification

A postcolonial reading of *The Book of Secrets* will no doubt be attentive to the character-development of Nurmohammed Pipa in a rather sympathetic way. Here is neither a disturbing East African subject like Ngugi's Mugo nor a popular East African one like Okot's Lawino.[12] Here is an East African subject that rises from pit latrine to palace then to "pariah status" in a struggle that can only be best interpreted as the resilience of the human spirit amidst perpetual adversity. Pipa's process of subjectification, development as a character is at the heart of *The Book of Secrets* and the conclusive episode of *The Gunny Sack*. As Pipa grows up, dreams, achieves, loses and dies, Vassanji treats us to a full account of what it means to be an Asian African in East Africa; at least an Asian African *dukawallah*.

The Gunny Sack was published in 1989, five years before *The Book of Secrets*. It is here we first meet Nurmohammed Pipa through the narrator's explanation that "Mzee Pipa, Old Barrel, was the oldest resident on the corner of Kichwele and Viongozi streets. Also called Pipa corner..." (TGS, 99). Interestingly, the Pipa we meet in *The Book of Secrets* is the young Pipa. This

Pipa is a character described in the diary of the colonial administrator, Alfred Corbin being re-constructed by *The Book of Secrets*'s narrator, Mr. Pius Fernandes.

The younger Pipa is a burly, quarrelsome youth travelling from the border-town Moshi in Tanzania to Kikono on the Kenyan side to attend Shamsi community celebrations in a bid to see a girl he intends to marry (TBS, 46). We will discuss this young, then old Pipa as he traverses the narrative landscapes of the two novels. He is a typical case of a racially different migrant born in East Africa—though native, his alien origins make him simply impossible to belong to Africa. Pipa like his community in real life, forever finds himself at a nexus between political discourse and identity-formation.

In other words, he cannot define himself out with the racialised political and socio-historical backgrounds that nurse him. He is born without a father, as an economic nomad, a marginal but powerful figurehead, a prisoner of fate, and all the lives of the other characters—Asian African or otherwise—revolve around him. Pipa's estranged sense of being starts from the very early moments of his life as is evident through the detailed description and empathetic tone that Vassanji employs in the following passage:

> His given name was Nurmohamed—Pipa was the nickname given to the family by the neighbourhood, and had stuck. It made him feel a lack; of respectability, of a place that was truly home... He was simply an Indian, a Mhindi, from Moshi, a town in the vicinity of Kilimanjaro whose masters were Germans.
>
> He did not know where he himself had been born and when, in any calendar, German, Arabic, or Indian. Of his father, he remembered only a tall thin man with a scraggly beard, a kindly grin on his face as he pulled the boy's cheeks, saying "Dhaboo." His father had not died—Nurmohamed could not recall grief, a graveyard. His father had gone away, and the boy carried this knowledge within him like a hidden deformity. He remembered him as Dhaboo, and for many years lived in the expectation that his father would

> return, that one day when he came home from play Dhaboo would be there waiting...
>
> Of his mother, he remembered the long rains in the wet season falling through the cracks in the thatch roof, himself standing with her, shivering in a pool of water, his sister holding his hand. Another scene: squatting in the latrine with his mother, watching a fast and furious stream hit the ground under her and joining with his own wavering spurt. He looked in vain at her darkness for a member corresponding to his own, had had his arm smacked for pointing his finger at that mysterious shadow... The boy was big and thickset, and nicknamed Pipa, meaning, "barrel," described him so well that it became exclusively his. Boys teased him by running past and jeering "pip-pip-pip Pipa!" (TBS, 127-8)

In this rather inauspicious way, we are ushered into the worlds of Nurmohammed Pipa. From this excerpt, we can contrive two important details, crucial to our concerns in this chapter.

Firstly, from the last description in the passage above we are invited to denial of belonging that is to later emerge in the life of Pipa and other Asian African characters in a more apocalyptic manner at the end of both novels. Secondly, the unfortunate origins of Pipa mark the difficult preliminary environment that bred early Asian Africans and gave them the stimulus to forever quest for development and security. In this sense it is possible to read in this originary moment of Pipa's tragic life the general conditions that inform the migratory sensibility in the Asian African psyche.

Pipa's origin crystallises the toughness of diasporic origins which is one of the central concerns in Vassanji's social discourse. His thesis is that the *dukawallah* and indeed the early Asian Africans did not rise from positions of inherited or acquired familial affluence but from conditions of deprivation, unhomeliness and insecurity. These conditions are the ones that, as we saw in chapter two, drove many an early migrant from India to Africa. Little wonder these same conditions form the beginning point of self-definition when Salim Juma's identity is questioned by Mrs Gaunt at the

very beginning of Vassanji's first novel, *The Gunny Sack*. In the originary moment of Pipa's life we thus read the beginnings of a narrative of location and dislocations whose descriptions form the storylines of the selected novels. The profound wretchedness of his early days and the hopelessness of a youth deprived of comfort develop that sense of estrangement.

Even as a child in Moshi. Pipa is regarded as an unfortunate child. He had an inauspicious growing up without a father but with a prostituting mother. His surly and burly nature marked him out for misfortune. It is these childhood events that loom large for him later in life and in the novel. Everywhere he goes, unfortunate circumstances follow him like a shadow and when he thinks he has broken free off them that are when he is hardest hit. As a teenager, he almost beats up his immoral mother but on reflection makes a personal decision to go away instead. He becomes a porter. Moshi then becomes an imaginative location of origin; a site of dislocation. This tiny border town that literally is an interstitial place between Kenya and Tanzania gives its interstitial mark on the identity and life of Pipa from the very moment that he decides to move away.

Seen from this perspective, we can argue that the two selected novels are not so much stories about the interstitial origins of Asian Africans as they are about the results and experiences that obtain from such origins. This explains why in the novels's own non-linear(ised) narrative sequence, Vassanji does not begin *The Gunny Sack* or *The Book of Secrets* by giving us the early days of Pipa. He does not give us a straightforward account leading us through the linear development of Pipa until his death as is typical of postcolonial African novels by Black writers such as Ngugi's and Achebe's *Weep Not Child* or *Things Fall Apart* respectively.[13] On the contrary, he

begins by giving us the intricate milieu and social players who are going to affect Pipa's life and that of other Asian African characters.

The most significant are Alfred Corbin and Dhanji Govindji in *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack* respectively. This textual strategy necessarily turns the reader to an inquiry of the reasons as to why the narrators, who are in exile, came to be there in the first place. It also leads one to question why the exiled narrators think it important to begin their narrations from historical events and times past.

In the passage on Pipa's early life above, Vassanji prepares us for a moving tale; the tragic tale of a man whose major sin was to be born a native of racially alien ancestry in East Africa. He does this by offering us the view that Pipa is a man denied his place in the world or actually disowned by the very world that he lives in. It is lack, acquisition, nature, and destructiveness of power that are the subjects of tragedy. Pipa is not driven away from home due to his lack of and need for power—at least in its political sense. His is a quest for stability and security and he naturally sees trading as both the traditional communal and legitimate road to his aspirations that is typical of his community.

By hatching him from the shell of poverty and near-destitution, Vassanji creates the prerequisite space or stage for the tragic account that is Pipa's life. Seen in this light, Pipa stands for something bigger than his own subjectivity even as he is introduced to the reader. He is depicted as a normal human with no control over his actions for he seems to emerge from a world which fatalistically has already set a destiny for him. Vassanji sums him up thus, "...a burly youth with an angry glower for a world that did not want him." (TBS, 128)

Such an inability to effect action or chart ones own destiny; such a lack of agency in the process of effecting viable self-constructive change points to issues of marginality and emasculation. This is because action breeds change and change does begin somewhere and end somewhere. Subsequently, from the moment when we are introduced to Pipa's early life, we are made alert to the fact that something is going to happen.

How is Pipa going to be affected by such precocious origins as Vassanji amply describes such deprived origins? This wonder excites in the reader a sense of expectation if not arousing a humanist sympathy with the forsaken and vulnerable, burly Asian African. This pre-emptive arousal of sympathy for this *dukawallah* urchin points to a crucial discursive politics of reader-seduction. This is where Vassanji conspires cleverly to influence the reader in a persuasive manner to judge Pipa not as a piece of wood that is called a *dukawallah*, but as a man; in fact an underprivileged man. Pipa's early life of want and insecurity just like that of Hassam Pirbhai, Hassam Uncle or Dhanji Govindji in *The Gunny Sack* or real life Asian African progenitors has a significant narrative function. In it, Pipa ceases to be a singular subjectivity and becomes an extended metaphor that articulates the origins of Asian African migrant status at the margins or at the interstices of comfort and security.

His humble and common background demonstrates the potentialities of pain, gain, poverty, and power or loss of it that accrues from such spaces of destitutional existence as the one he occupies as a youth. Considering that the *The Book of Secrets* within this chapter is mainly approached as a location of Asian African subjectification, it may not be generically tragic, but the moods the novel evokes are essentially tragic, such as Pipa's tragic

quest for a kind of belonging...or not belonging in East African colonial and postcolonial dispensations. From this borderland town of Moshi, Pipa plunges into other interstitial settings such as the coastal towns of Tanga and Dar es Salaam in search of life's good fortunes rather than wallow in self-pity and abject poverty. In this decisive action, we see the resolute spirit that characterises the Asian African psyche leading them from spaces of want and discomfort in search of a better life.

Much as the positivist decision to move and its execution endears Pipa to the readers, Vassanji later contrives to make this seemingly worthy decision the first step to a long process of fate-driven being. This leads one to wonder whether it is Pipa, Vassanji, society, or all, who are responsible for his later character of conniving, thrifty but wealthy *dukawallah* who loses his fortunes to Nyerere's nativistic Africanisation programmes soon after Independence.

Indeed, the failures of home life igniting a certain wanderlust within the Asian African community in East Africa forms one of Vassanji's major thematic concerns. His characters are typically described as seeking upward socio-economic mobility originally within legalistic and moralistic frameworks that simply do not work. This accrues from the fact that the spaces or home that Asian African characters like Pipa occupy defines them as aliens despite the fact that they are natives of these same spaces or homes. This is what the narrator Pius Fernandes means when he says:

> I had returned to a country on the brink of independence, one that was preparing to transmute. The date had been set for December that year, six month away, and the laid-back Dar I had known was bubbling with excitement. There was hope in the air, and a cheery confidence, symbolised in the promise of a torch of freedom to be mounted on the summit of Kilimanjaro for all to see, across the continent and beyond. If in later years, bush-shirted demagogues waylaid those dreams with arid ideologies, and torpid

> bureaucrats drained our energies, at least we were spared the butchers....But I am losing perspective (TBS, 273)

Ultimately Vassanji appears to be philosophising about the vanity of human quests for a permanent sense of belonging when a migrant tries to fit into a diasporic situation. He argues that such quests are marked by a chain of absurdities especially when one is a racially different subject in another land where a different race is dominant and considers that land its exclusive homeland.

As we have seen, the story of Pipa's early life is an all-too-common East African tale of poverty and destitution. Without a present father, with an errant mother and an unhomely neighbourhood, a perfect recipe for migrations and movement is inculcated almost naturally into Pipa's sense of being. All these pent up feelings coupled with a harsh environment cultivated in the person of Pipa certain bitterness towards life and towards his mother. This is especially the case when we assess his mother's moral standing as a prostitute in the pious context of the Asian African culture.

Pipa is not born aggressive; but aggression is brought out from within him by factors that lie outside him. Vassanji describes it this way:

> Like many of the boys in Moshi, he made a few hellers carrying at the railway station, and like them became more adept and aggressive as he grew older, jostling and shouting and crowding around the two weekly trains on the Tanga-Moshi line. And like many a young man, one day he allowed a Tanga-bound train to take him in its third-class carriage to wherever it would. (TBS, 129)

Youths who leave home without notice to make their way in the world profess a trait of delinquency. They, like Pipa, illustrate how young people will later enter relationships intended in someway to be substitutes for the families. This is why, as we shall see, Pipa finds in the Shamsi at Tanga, a community that he feels he belongs to. We must point out that although

Pipa is against social authority his identification with the Shamsi of Tanga paradoxically depict that he needs the same authority as a kind of security.

This sense of communal security even enables him to take account of how his life had been in Moshi before he left and how he needs to break away from that past and forge a new way forward for himself. Vassanji puts that revision and re-vision this way:

> If guilt, in subsequent months and years, came at all, it came not from his having raised a hand against his mother—that blow became the single act of violence that absolved her in his eyes, a punishment for her sin. Instead, he felt a vague sense of guilt at his inadequacy, at not being able to do anything with himself that would raise his mother and sister from degradation to Indian respectability. (TBS, 129)

The expiatory value of that physical conformity with his originary locus of security and provision made Pipa realise that he had the moral responsibility to play the role of a typical family bread winner.

This realisation then became a formidable power that possessed him throughout his adult years as he wandered from place to place trying to run away from the conditions of want and insecurity from which he emerged. Pipa's wanderlust leads to the cultivation of a development-conscious orientation which in itself or *inter alia* other factors leads to migrations from the original locations of one's culture to Other worlds. Pipa's industry can be seen even at the start of his working life:

> He found a job as a sweeper in the big hotel called Kaiserhof on the promenade...He would clean under the tables and chairs after they had gone, sweeping away cigarettes stubs and crumbs, scraps of paper. On rare but not impossible occasions, they left something behind. Once he returned a wallet—not before removing one note from it, a modest one—and was rewarded. (TBS, 130)

It is this focus and industry that makes Pipa develop from a Moshi lay-about to a Tanga sweeper and, "...from this sweeper's job he moved on to pulling a rickshaw, rented from an Indian. (TBS, 130)

Later in pursuit of this upward socio-economic mobility, Pipa moves to Dar es Salaam that has a greater promise of expansion and growth than Tanga. All the time, in whatever he did the 'orphaned' young man displayed acumen for wise decisions and the ability to pursue success, no matter the risk or uncertainties involved. Pipa cuts the image of a soul running away from the initial discomforts of the early locations of his life. A soul that is running towards more tolerant and beckoning comforts, "for a few months he did a number of odd jobs, beginning at the harbour, where porters were always in demand. He lived in Swahili quarters then, in the African sector." (TBS, 131)

However, as he moves from one location to another in pursuit of his initial goal—human comfort, Pipa is beguiled with many challenges. The most important of them all is that he feels that although his material fortune seems sure so long as he works hard and smart, his emotional or social fortunes are not. He feels the need to belong, the need to identify with a certain people, a certain place. Vassanji posits:

> Dar es Salaam was all that he had been promised it would be...Here, surely, was opportunity; yet how was he to go about finding it? Who was he in this town, who knew him? As he was to find out, you had to...be *somebody*. Of his savings only a little remained, and certainly not enough to go back home the way he had come. (TBS, 151)

The tragedy of Pipa is that as a migrant he can never really belong. Underlying every action, thought and dreams in the life of Pipa, there seem to be ever-rising hurdles to be surmounted, making it really impossible for him to ever achieve the measure of comfort which he seeks. The eruption of such tensions or hurdles on the way to Pipa's goal offers the painful lesson that his past cannot be shed. This insecure and unstable past characterised by the need to belong.

The need of having to be another person other than the nonentity that he was rides high. These tragic difficulties gain more value when they are envisioned as hints of the futility of Pipa's journey to success. This general reflection finds its illustration in the following particularly meaningful illustration:

> Often in the afternoon he would sit before the blindfolded camel that drove the mill as it walked perpetually in circles—patient, doggedly persistent in the illusion that it had a destination—and he would feel a surge of pity for it. Where could the beast think it was going—did it see rewards at the end of its journey, did it hope to meet a mate, did it hope for happiness, children, old age? (TBS, 132)

Through this disturbing question, and allegory, Vassanji appears to suggest that the construction of the human quest for comfort in postcolonial narratives, and the exercise of human will and drive through hard work, demands constant reflection and questioning. Vassanji seems to intimate that the journey undertaken by a migrant or a migrant community in search of belonging and security in foreign locations is normally marred by doubts and never-ending feelings of despair. Pipa's dream of escape from the vicious cycle of poverty is confounded by blasts of doubt and uncertainty that cumulatively become signs of his experience or the experience of those who belong nowhere.

If we consider the recurrence of this question or Pipa's reflection cited above, in the two novels, then one can argue that these novels are an assertion of self-inquiry and quests for self-definition. The questions become important leitmotifs, seen in various aspects and shades capturing the desire to belong and attain a stabilised subjectivity, a "somebodyness." The preliminary effort at answering Pipa's question can be seen in the philosophy of hard work that he chooses to embrace. Vassanji reveals:

> [H]is customers, as for the rest of his life, were the poorer Africans and Asians, those who could not stock their larders for more than a day—buying a little of this and a little of that. But bit by bit, as Pipa would say, the ocean gets filled. Haba haba hujaza kibaba. There are those who sit in their shops twitching their legs or picking their noses, saying their rosaries or singing hymns; I have my packets. A little bit of turmeric, chili, coriander, inside a flat cone of paper—fold, fold, fold, and a packet in the basket that would fetch an anna. It became a meditation for him, folding packets, an unconscious act during which he could think, come to himself, watch the world. (TBS, 203)

This is a world that has been deliberately re-presented to signify the ruptures and continuities that mark the Asian African experience across the boundaries of the two novels just as it does across the boundaries of fiction and reality. The idea of Pipa and his philosophical inquiry to the meaning of life focuses on a politics of stability and chaos, which finds its expression in the *dukawallah* notions of success, vividly captured above. There is a need to consider the tragic end by death in light of his quest for "happiness, children and old age." This is how we can discover that Pipa, as he observes the camel, is in a kind of limbo—an interstitial space between want and prosperity. This space is made complex by the inquiry into self-definitions and the need to belong/ to have a home. This interstitial space that later becomes a benchmark in the lifeworld of Nurmohammed Pipa is a signifier of displacement and disjunction that cumulatively does totalise his experience of life.

The towns he stops by on his way to success such as Kikono and Tanga become certain borderlands as argued in the previous chapter. They become sites of the Asian African experience as articulated in the actual subjectification embodied by Pipa. Where as Pipa's subjectivity becomes in itself a location where the interstitial experiences of Asian Africans become generically speaking one entity. The consistent reiteration of the metonymic

nature of Pipa as a figure of Vassanji's selected novels insures coherence and continuity within the narratives of the two novels.

The metonymic joint between Pipa and his community enables an imagination of the tensions that mark the lives of the other Asian African characters in the two novels with Pipa's own and finally there is no distinction between the two. This is what Abdulrazak Gurnah means when he say, "Vassanji's story-telling is layered and complex...at the same time as these stories of love and its transformation into torture are narrated other stories of migration and sacrifice, of imperial adventure and hubris, are woven in with exemplary control."[14]

For instance, that moment of personal reflection that Pipa is locked in as he observes the camel is a major and recurrent motif in *The Book of Secrets*—in fact in Vassanji's entire literary *oeuvre*. This, in spite of the young man's industry:

> He had the industry of the spider. He hardly ever left the shop, until closing, when he would go to the mosque. In a world in which he had neither family nor prestige, he found a niche, and that's where he built. Business came to him. Whole grain from the farmers, which he would send to the mills for flour that he would sell; copra, from which he would extract oil to sell; cashews roasted and raw; old newspapers; even screws and nuts, bolts and nails. For everything there was a buyer... (TBS, 203)

The camel parable of the futility of human struggles against the circumstances of their origins becomes a sort of mnemonic strategy. This strategy constantly brings to the reader's mind the nullity of Pipa's struggle even as we see him follow the right channels to wealth-acquisition.

The same futility repeats itself in the person of Dhanji Govindji in *The Gunny Sack*. We see his quest for answers to Pipa's questions lead him to a tragic death when he is murdered leaving his search for his Afro-Asian son incomplete and his desire for stability unsatisfied. We see the same

questions beset the exiled narrator of *The Gunny Sack*, Govindji's great grandson Salim Husseni as he wonders whether in Canada he has finally found a home and a sense of belonging. The same applies to the gaps that mark Fernandes quests for a lost history by Mr. Fernandes—the narrator of *The Book of Secrets*.

It appears all these permutating motifs try to find their answers in evocation of historical icons, historical events and history. Yet they are still aware of the crucial connection between the present and the past point of origin as is Pipa. In other words, any attempts at answering the questions raised by the logic of the blindfolded camel are attempts in investigating the logic of illusory destinies!

Indeed, when associative meanings of what Edward Said calls, "imaginative geographies" or simply locations are transferred to the character development of Asian Africans one point becomes clear. [15] The otherwise normal stories of exile and migration can be translated into important political texts questioning aspects of the writer's own milieu. The conjecture of Pipa's body or even mind as a location resounds with the discontinuities of cultural identification and the politics of belonging. These tensions radiate from isolated historical events endured, and trajectories of Self-growth as one enters the worlds of adulthood from the confines of youth. Pipa and indeed the other Asian African characters in Vassanji's novels are not only interpretative of the interstitial settings they occupy but are also inter-penetrative of the same. That means they make the settings they occupy be interstitial locations of a kind or another.

It is this clever and intricate intertextuality between subjectivity and setting that forms something of a touchstone of Vassanji's writing. By

understanding the politics and poetics of his settings, we understand his characters and vice versa. Considering the voluminous nature of his narrations, normally straddling a century and five generations of Asian Africans scattered between Zanzibar and Nairobi, this intertextuality also facilitates a certain masterful thematic and structural consistency in Vassanji's work. We can get an idea of this intricate interweaving of setting, community, individual and ambition in the following excerpt:

> Dar es Salaam was an important place. It was the residence of the German Governor. There were many Europeans, many officials, whom it was best to avoid. Visitors poured in from the harbour. Within minutes, a street could be cleared to make way for the dignitary—on horse, in a motorcar or rickshaw, or even on foot. There were people—from the interior, mostly—who would go on their knees, down on their knees in fear when a dignitary passed and humbly touch the ground with their heads lest they offend. In a place like this, there were many rules, and regulations, and a police force to see that they were obeyed. It mattered who you were, where you belonged: you were your tribe, caste, religion, community. There was rivalry among Indian communities, jealousy and enmity from the old country. Many a lonely young man had been compelled to change allegiance, many a willing young man duly rewarded with a bride and a business...
>
> Whether he was Shamsi community or not, Pipa could not say with certainty. But like many others before him, he accepted the Shamsis, and the rewards that followed: a job and a place to stay; eminent men to vouch for him; and if he wanted, a bride. So he could become the camel who at last stopped his endless journey and found a home. (TBS, 133)

This passage also serves to elaborate yet another important point to the reader of *The Book of Secrets*. From this supposed identification with the Shamsi who are an interstitial community in Dar, Pipa's nature becomes by proxy that of the Shamsi and the Shamsis' interstitiality becomes a quality of Pipa. When Pipa later collapses into one single reality characterised by a history of pain, struggle and damnation, his community, the Shamsis also collapse and so does his last setting where he thought he had found a home—Dar.

The collapse of Pipa and his world into one signals the unity of Vassanji's narratives in spite of their colossal scope in terms of time and

space. We can also see that by shedding his individual identity and merging himself with the Shamsi cultural or communal identity, Pipa and his private space such as his memory enter into a new polity of negotiating the diasporic experience. From that moment, whatever happens to the Shamsi community and indeed to their racial community—the Asian Africans of East Africa, also happens to Pipa. Despite his singular background and his personal misfortunes, Pipa ceases to become just a character that we meet at the outset of this chapter and becomes the embodiment of the Asian African experience in East Africa.

The equalising and levelling effect we have described as "collapse" reflects a deracinating impulse that is the hallmark of Vassanji's fiction. It gestures at a celebration of transgressing boundaries that cannot be contained by radical discourses of African postcoloniality such as nativism and/or Afrocentrism. This is because these discourses thrive on and indeed feed from creation of exclusionary boundaries akin to the Self and Other logic.

The complication of this trans-boundary orientation is evident when a moment of difficulty arises or in a moment when the identity of that orientation is questioned and judged. This is what happened to Pipa when he had to pay allegiance to the British/Kenyan side first and next to the German/Tanzanian side during the First World War (TBS, 165-6). In Pipa's world just as in the world of the Shamsi and many Asian Africans, the boundaries between these two colonies [now countries] does not exist. There are many relatives and friends on both sides of the Kenya/Ugandan boundary. Vassanji himself talks of his family's fluid movement between Tanzania and Kenya in manner likely to suggest that you do not have to be

either a Tanzanian or a Kenyan per se. One can be both of this [and more] at the same time.

No matter which side of the divide Pipa runs to his psychological odyssey makes him intuitively apprehend the futility of his situation. He tries to run from the duties assigned to him by fate and Vassanji but he runs in a complete circle. The more he tries to lead his life and dreams as represented by Vassanji, the more his Moshi past becomes a glaring part of that run. The dense sense of connection between setting and character development manifested in the drama that is Pipa's life underscores the special nature of Vassanji's characters.

The connection between the settings of the past and the contemporary character of people like Pipa is even more pervasive as is the case in *The Gunny Sack*. Salim Juma, away in exile many generations from his progenitor, Dhanji Govindji has to supply Mrs Gaunt with an explanation of who he is and where he comes from. Such conditions of communal rememory as a way of self-definition are important. The concern with contrasting, erasing, formulating, identifying, demarcating and crossing boundaries and spaces—be they physical or mental—seem to be one of the most central concerns of Vassanji's process of subjectification. This concern informs the narrative attempt to construct the process of self-identification. It involves the articulation of subjectivity based upon discredited forms of knowledge like the *dukawallah* stereotype forged in sympathy with many historical determinants and personal choices.

Pipa is usually shown to be operating outside the legal framework of an oppressive law system but Vassanji insists that Pipa finds no pleasure in doing so. He is considered by many a cheat and an artful *dukawallah*. Yet,

Vassanji argues persuasively that there is a lot of hard work and industry behind Pipa's wealth that we see being nationalised at the end of the novel. In fact, there are some instances of the book that the reader gets to appreciate the young man's industry and the way Vassanji creatively describes it such as this one:

> Pipa Store of Kikono was a small provision store. It was here that the legend of the thrift and cunning of Nurmohamed Pipa first took hold. Sitting at his shopfront all day, patiently wrapping packets, dealing with customers one by one, taking in just a few *heller* or *paisa* at a time. And one couldn't help noticing that the unfortunate young man seemed finally to have attracted baraka, blessings. Business at his store was brisk. (TBS, 153)

In this instance, Vassanji gives the reader a portrait of an achiever, who is struggling to create a distance between the poverty that he was raised in and the affluence he is seeking. This sense of in-between want and achievement is one of the most definitive experiential locations that characterise Pipa's development as a character. The important point to note is that Pipa had to move from the peripheral locations of Kikono, Tanga, and Moshi to find himself literally living in plenty on prosperous Uhuru Street in downtown Dar es Salaam.

The literary value of *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets,* the two novels that Pipa appears in, *is* to be found in the manner in which Vassanji analyses Pipa's mind below the level of consciousness. The sociological conditions which we have offered in the previous chapters and argued as crucial to the formation of the interstitial subject like Pipa is pursued mainly through Pipa's desires, reflections and fears. In a revealing naturalistic undertone, Vassanji stresses the impact of the environment/location on the bizarre patterns of conduct to be found in Pipa as a metonym of the Asian Africans of East Africa.

It is for this reason that, for instance, Pipa feels compelled to run away from spaces that stand in the way of his desire for a homely life. This is why Pius Fernandes tells us "Pipa was home now, yet lived in fear. He was a marked man, known both to the agents of Maynard and the allies of Germans; any of them could come to call on him as they had done in Kikono" (TBS, 200). The above illustrated feeling of unhomeliness that Pipa feels after his interstitial experience of the First World War later becomes the hallmark of his state of being as well.[16] No matter where he goes or what he does Pipa never gets comfort or feels at home. It is for this reason that he rents a house with a shop front in Dar and that's how the famous Pipa Store begins a new. (TBS, 203)

The quest for a comfortable economic status and life gave Pipa the original impetus to leave his hometown of Moshi in the first place. This in essence implies that economic determinism dictates an unequal distribution of social wealth and by extension, social status, both of which contribute immensely to the emergence of the Asian African *dukawallahs* of East Africa. This view expands Vassanji's main thesis in the two novels. He argues that it is the conditions in which Pipa operates ever since he left Moshi as a burly teenager that have created Pipa—the despicable *dukawallah* who's industry goes hand in hand with his conniving nature.

Vassanji appears to say that those in need are inclined to use any means to fulfil their wants and needs, even if it means breaking the law. Nevertheless, no matter how much he falls or faces challenges, Pipa's nomadic sense that led him away from the poverty of Moshi in search of both belonging and material affluence make him soldier on. A good

illustration of this resilience that is another definitive aspect of the *dukawallah* can be seen below:

> For Pipa, the closing of the wart brought a tragedy that marked the end of one life and the beginning of a new one in a world that had changed...The day after he discovered his wife dead, Pipa and the community buried her in the little graveyard of Kikono. There was no civil government to investigate her murder; no witnesses were sought, no rewards offered, no evidence gathered. The Shamsis assumed that a marauding soldier had violated and killed the young wife, and –too conveniently in the eyes of the bereaved husband—had dropped the matter. They were a peace-loving people not in the habit of seeking vengeance. They could take comfort in the thought that Mariamu had moved on to a better life in the hereafter. (TBS, 199)

It appears that Vassanji is concerned with an exploration of how contexts and pre-texts influence the text that is the *Dukawallah* subjectivity. He reaches the conclusion that these extra-literary factors are integral to the understanding of the nature and character of Asian Africans of East Africa, especially if we chose to know them through the *dukawallah* image as a form of knowledge.

Vassanji's line of thought articulates the conviction that Pipa's self-positioning in the racial and social equations of both the colonial and postcolonial eras give clues or is in fact the summation of all Asian African dreams, fears, worries and prospects. The captivating point is that whereas Pipa seeks only a home, belonging and progeny in his pursuits, his tribulations and challenges arising from his interstitiality bred by his location in the East African cultural world underscore the vanity of such human pursuits.

It appears Vassanji is troubled by the parable of the blindfolded camel (TBS 132). The more you try to make a life out of your humble beginnings, the more you will suffer and even lose your life. This especially applies to the Asian African peoples of East Africa as embodied in the life and times of Nurmohamed Pipa. A consideration of the surreptitious and

exclusionary nature of the Asian African community leads us to conclude that *The Book of Secrets* is actually a "books of secrets." The novel supplies a postcolonial reader, illuminating insights into the colonial and post-colonial worlds of the Asian Africans in East Africa, albeit in a fictional manner.

It is when we read *The Book of Secret* as a book of secrets that Vassanji's Asian African characters like Nurmohamed Pipa become exciting aspects of the novel. They become sites where the divergent, contradictory and contesting discourses of cultural authority meet. Through these characters and their development throughout the narration we are given thought-provoking revelations. For instance that the need to always go back to the point of origin is given key significance. To understand Pipa, we have first to go back to the infant Pipa in Moshi. The same applies to Salim Juma in *Gunny Sack*. For his exile to be more meaningful and his narration more powerful, we first have to understand where he is coming from, and his family history from Dhanji Govindji onwards.

That is why soon after the devastating war and the losses that he incurs, Pipa finds it necessary to go back home and revise his life. But his home like that of many other Asian Africans throughout the two novels is quite unhomely and as soon as he reaches Moshi, Pipa is off again, in search of a homely space:

> He had grown to love his wife [before she was raped then murdered by some unknown assailants]. He felt cheated, felt her memory somehow violated by the quick resolution in the matter of her murder. But his elders had ruled; and there was no other authority—save the military, which he feared—to which he could turn. The town of Kikono now held for him the bitter reminder of a happy beginning cut short. Within days, as soon as the British armies had finally broken into German East Africa, Pipa set off for his hometown of Moshi. (TBS, 200)

There is that deep feeling of tire and loss that is captured above. We are brought to share in the pains of searching for homes and the pains of losing these homes. Pipa who only wanted to become a better person in life is repeatedly reminded of his tragic identity that is the bedrock of his experiences.

Pipa's tragic identity as a racially different migrant in a changing East Africa is beyond his control. So is his interstitial sense, which is interpreted by the postcolonial governments as "fence-sitting" leads him to the abyss of dispossession as he loses all his wealth in the nativist Africanisation programmes of the 1960s. Finally, with all strength, youth and stamina spent on a null and void journey, Pipa succumbs to the pressure of his diasporic identity as an Asian African in East Africa and dies.

By accentuating Pipa's entanglement with Moshi and all the other settings where his life is located and dislocated, Vassanji is able to capture what we called in the previous chapter—the poetics of setting. His interest in man and human destiny fashioned at and by the interstices coupled with his desire to give this philosophy of life through his remarkable creative imagination promotes Vassanji's prowess as a fine writer.

The Book of Secrets, is really a haunting tale of interstitial man caught in-between whatever forces that translate his existence into an arena on which other forces beyond our control, facilitate internal and external stress on our identities. These overwhelming forces are best embodied by the camel driver in the parable of the camel supplied by Vassanji above [see page 110]. Pipa, alternately patronised and tormented by such invincible forces embodied in the persons of Maynard, then Corbin, then Nyerere, is tragically destined to be hounded and haunted into his fated *dukawallah*

subjectivity much as he attempts to run from it. He is a victim of his time and space.

From the foregoing, we submit that the novel can be read as a writer's exercise in the conjecture of the tragedy between the migrant, his fate and his location within a borderland in so far as it concerns belonging and survival. Pipa's death after dispossession in the Africanisation programmes of the 1960s by the newly-independent Tanzania becomes a translational experience. He becomes a microcosm of the "chaosmic" worlds that is the interstitial worlds of Asian Africans in East Africa. It is in this sense that words fail both Fernandes and Juma as they muse over the difficulty of trying to intellectualise the tribulations of interstitiality as felt by Asian Africans in post-independence East Africa thus:

> How to recall a storm, the actual downpour, the continuous pelting, in this case, of events that battered at the old world and brought down the shaky structures that had lost their foundations? Wiped clean was one prevailing image, exaggerated and too personal, applying perhaps to the bankbook, for a storm wrought by human hands does not wipe clean but leaves debris behind. Broken hopes, broken families, above all, broken faith washed away by the torrents into time's flooding gutters replaced by a new cynicism: every man for himself and God against all. (TGS, 239)

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have engaged Vassanji on his characterisation in *The Book of Secrets,* with special reference to the "enabling" stereotypical trope of the *dukawallah.* We argue that of all the subject-positions or images of the Asian Africans in East Africa and indeed in Vassanji's novels, the *dukawallah* as the quintessential image of the Asian African in East Africa is a popular door through which to understand the community. Through Nurmohammed Pipa Vassanji resurrects this trope, otherwise buried in the minds of many East Africans by indigenous and White writers through thus

affording us fresh insights. He re-narrativises the stereotype from its disavowed subject-position of an "evil, conniving, segregationist *Muindi*" and (as)signs it to multiple subject-positions evident in the trajectory of Pipa's life so as to explore East Africa's (post)colonial ambiguities, conflicting and intertwined histories.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE IN-BETWEEN WORLDS OF M. G. VASSANJI: A RETROSPECTIVE CONCLUSION

5.1. Introduction

This study set out to look at the manner in which MG Vassanji draws from his experience as an Asian Africa writer to render certain aspects of his novels, *The Gunny Sack* and *the Book of Secrets*. These aspects were setting, and character development (subjectification). In doing this, the study drew impetus from Homi Bhabha's view that postcolonial writers embrace writing as a kind of agency. Vassanji was discussed as an Asian African writer within East African literary discourse, and how he occupies an ambivalent location when he is viewed collectively with other East African novelists such as Elspeth Huxley and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.[1]

Such writers as Vassanji demonstrate through their literary works how the specific experience of a racially-distinct diasporic community that lived under twentieth-century European colonialism problematises their post-independence predicament. This was our second submission. Thirdly, we read M. G. Vassanji's selected novels, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. The reading was guided by the view that in terms of form the two novels did display the influence of the ambivalent world occupied by Asian African writers, whose experiences in East Africa the novels reveal.

5.2. General Observations and Synthesis of the Findings

A brief background of the Asian African community and writer within the East African situation was the focus of the first chapter. It mapped the causes and course of the study, charting a way forward after reviewing related and relevant work:

1. To critically read how Vassanji's consciousness of his interstitiality as an Asian African writer emanates from within the cultural experiences of his community through a historical lens.
2. To supply a critical interpretation of the textual manner in which consciousness of occupying an in-between world influences how Vassanji treats his settings in the selected novels.
3. To further illustrate how the settings of Vassanji's selected novels affect interpretations of major characters such as Nurmohamed Pipa, who is modelled on the popular stereotype of the "dukawallah."

Each objective was subsequently addressed in a chapter of its own. Postcolonial literary theory underpinned the reading of Vassanji's novels, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*.

While historical setting has not been overlooked in discussions of Vassanji's novels, it is usually detached from any aesthetic or literary appreciation of its connection with aspects of the novels under study.[2] This might be sufficient if Vassanji were an indigenous African postcolonial writer, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, because much has been said about the novels of such writers. But he is not. Vassanji is a member of a post-colonial community in East Africa that is considered minority and diasporic. Chapter two was thus an attempt to set Vassanji's practice as a writer in an appropriate East African historical and aesthetic context. This was done so

that the quiddity of the form and themes of *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* may be assessed more accurately.

After extensive reading in postcolonial literary criticism, it becomes apparent that literary criticism cannot take place effectively in a vacuum, a space of pure reason or absolute judgment. It takes place in a cultural and political environment, where at a certain time certain problems need to be addressed in new ways. It is for this reason that in this chapter we contextualise the sense of in-betweeness of the Asian African community evident in the works of various Asian African writers, especially Vassanji. By understanding the specificities of the Asian African experience in East Africa, a reader of Vassanji's novel attains a fuller aesthetic appreciation of both the social vision and formal aspects.

Vassanji is as deliberate in his treatment of setting as he is of the Asian African characters. Indeed his settings as formal aspects of the selected novels are significant factors in the general view of the novels as postcolonial modes of representation. The imagined settings of *The Gunny Sack* for instance, are not always the actual environment occupied by his community. There are also fictive locations, mythical locations such as Matamu, which like the Dar and Zanzibar in *The Gunny Sack* bespeak the demarcation of society into three major racial groups: Whites, Browns and Blacks.

A consideration, therefore, of the actual location of Vassanji's characters such as Dhanji Govindji and Salim Juma needs to be seen within the racially and experientially fractured lens. This view serves to clarify the moral position of lived experience. Seen from this perspective, Govindji and Salim occupy different experiential locations of the East African colonial and

postcolonial culture from Black characters or White characters. This is the subject of the third chapter.

One of the most interesting features of Vassanji's work is his anxiety to *re*-interpret the popular East African stereotype of the *dukawallah* in the East African literary tradition. Chapter four focuses on the story of Pipa in *The Book of Secrets* – a story of futile negotiations in his attempts to find a homely sense as an East African, both in the colonial and postcolonial dispensation. Pipa's plight surreptitiously disavowed earlier stock portrayals of the *dukawallah* as mysterious and conniving migrant in East African literature. In *The Book of Secrets,* Vassanji presents Pipa from ambivalent subject positions, as wretched offspring of a whore, as hardworking labourer, as double agent, as prosperous but conniving *dukawallah* and as loving father/husband.

Vassanji's preference for ambiguity rather than fixity in his treatment of the *dukawallah* character in *The Book of Secrets* is an important exercise within postcolonial literary criticism. It points to a shift in the process of character development away from the constraints of limited perspectives of the Other to a depiction of the Other from the Other's perspective. Rather than depict Pipa as just a wily and cunning shopkeeper in post-independence Tanzania, the readers of *The Book of Secrets* are treated to the personal and communal historical contexts that make Pipa the *dukawallah* that he is. This is what Bhabha's line of thinking within postcolonial studies advocates for; a shift away from the limited view of the Other as either negative or positive to a consideration of the process of subjectification that makes the Other who he or she is.

5.3. Specific Findings from Reading the Two Novels

In *The Gunny Sack*, it appears that interstitiality is the basic leitmotif around which the whole novel is constructed. Vassanji's imagined settings in this novel appear to be constructive textual modes that help the writer bring out his theme of interstitiality with respect to the Asian African community in East Africa. Setting therefore is seen as metaphor of dislocation and as thematic motive. Chapter two which focussed mainly on this novel illustrates the implication of interstitial locations in the experience and narration of Asian African cultural difference and identity.

In *The Book of Secrets*, the subject of the fourth chapter, however, Vassanji cross-questions the (ab)uses of the *dukawallah* stereotype, subsequently creating a complex and ambivalent character, Nurmohammed Pipa. The novelist shows us how this quintessential image of the Asian African in East Africa is at once bound to and yet not of the landscape that he inhabits. He leads us to a re-examination of the reader's own subjectivity; a re-examination of the standpoints from which misconceptions and misinterpretations are formed. Ultimately, Vassanji provides no easy answers to both findings stated above. He insists, nevertheless, that it is in the finer details of life that a full appreciation of the bigger picture is made possible.

5.4. Recommendations for Future Research Directions

The study was conducted within its stated scope and limitations. M. G. Vassanji's imagined and real experiences in-between the many worlds he has lived in and writes about are far too complex to be wholly depicted in

any number of critical studies. We avoided making overgeneralisations by narrowing focus to only two of the five novels of Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. And in our reading of these two novels, we specifically focussed on the novelist's treatment of setting and character development. Nevertheless, the following areas provide research directions for further scholarship in line with the present study:

1. There is need to interrogate Vassanji's ambivalence or interstitiality from the perspective of linguistic-based identity politics. This venture might cross-question the poststructuralist [and indeed postcolonialist] conviction that language is the bedrock of identity-negotiation, construction and articulation.
2. Vassanji's fictional women such as Ji Bhai, Kulsum and Amina in *The Gunny Sack* and Mariamu in *The Book of Secrets* appear to be prominent structural, thematic and formal features. We suggest that an examination of their nature, character, identities, textuality, relations and meaning can be an original contribution to the study of Asian African literatures and indeed postcolonial gender discourse.

This study is in dialogue with other critical work on Vassanji and on other Asian African writers. Ultimately, literary works to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the stated intentions of the writers are at least considered. This is what we did with *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*. From our readings of Vassanji we can join Bhabha in suggesting that:

> Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which imagined communities' are given essentialist

> identities... This narrative inversion or circulation—which is in the spirit of my splitting of the people—makes untenable any supremacist, or nationalist claims to cultural mastery, for the position of narrative control is neither monocular nor monologic.[3]

Vassanji's counter-narratives in *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets* admittedly provoke tensions especially on the Asian African question that certainly demand more critical attention from literary scholars and other interested constituencies in East Africa. This reading is an attempt to open up more avenues of reciprocal and intercultural enrichment, understanding and knowledge.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

[1] *In a Brown Mantle* (Nairobi : Kenya Literature Bureau, 1972).

[2] To our knowledge, the term was first used in our definitive-classificatory sense by Sultan Somjee. See www.museums.or.ke/asian.html. Alternative references have been supplied and although, infrequent in their usage, they also point to the cultural ambivalence inherent in the community in mind. These alternative references include: "Brown African," "African Asians," "Asians in East Africa," "South Asians in East Africa /Afro-Asians," "Kenyan South Asians" among lesser known others. See John M Nazareth, *Brown Man, Black Country* (New Delhi: Tidings Publications, 1981); Charles Sarvan, 'Ethnicity and Alienation : The African Asian and His Response to Africa,' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literatures*, Vol. XX 1(1985) 100 ; J. S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa c. 1886, to 1945* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1969); Lawrence Hollingsworth, *The Asians of East Africa* (London: New York: Macmillan, 1960).; Dana April Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers: The World of East African Asians, 1750-1985* (New Delhi: New Age International, 1996) and Zahid Rajan, ed. *Awaaz: The Authoritative Journal of Kenyan South Asian History* Vol. 1-3 (Nairobi: Zand Publications, 2004) respectively. However, Somjee's designation, *Asian African*, is the preferred reference to the community as a cultural community in East Africa. It shows greater appreciation/awareness of the situational-locational reference of the community as it exists in postcolonial East Africa. That is to say it draws attention to the interstitial being located in-between "Asianness" and "Africanness" and finds its essence in the migrant nature of the Asian African community.

[3] We discovered that these 'New Asians' in Kenya are normally referred to by the Asian Africans as 'Rockets' alluding to their speedy acquisition of wealth from investment in the ever-growing Export Processing Zones (EPZ) business. The rockets are mainly South Asian nationals or representatives of South Asian multinationals with economic interests across the world, East Africa included.

[4] See for instance E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, 'The Political Economy of the Asian problem in Kenya 1883-1939,' *Transafrica Journal of History* 4, 1(1974): 135-149.

[5] See *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (London, Nairobi, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1972,) xix. See also his essay, The African Writer and his Past,' in Christopher Heywood, ed. *Perspectives on African Literature* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971,) 8.

[6] See Taban' s *Another Last Word* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1990,) 39-42. Besides the Blacks, Browns and the Whites, in East African culture there is also the Arabic component which inhabits the coastal region. Most of this component though, due to its close miscegenation with indginous African peoples are considered as being part of the Black Africans. Such a consideration is contentious for it does not pay attention to the fact that the Arabs enjoyed a somewhat second-class citizenship under the colonial government. For our puposes though, we look at the Arabic component as being part of the Black African community. Our argument hinges on the fact that writers such as Said Ahmed Mohamed and/or Ali Mazrui, though by and large of Arabic extraction are still considered mainstream literary voices in East Africa.

[7] See appendix one for more details on Vassanji's biographical data.

[8] This claim has been made with substantial arguments by Gareth Griffith, in his encylcopeadic book *African Literatures in English : East and West* (Essex :Pearson Educational Publishers, 2000). Apart from writing both fiction and criticism, Vassanji has also published other Asian African writers such as Peter Nazareth and Sophia Mustapha using his publishing house TSAR Books based in Toronto, Canada.

[9] See Wahome Mutahi, "Memories of Yesterday's Home," Lifestyle Magazine, *Sunday Nation* [Nairobi] 27 Oct. 1991:13.

[10] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London, New york : Routledge, 1994,) 171.

[11] See their edited book, *Decolonisation of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power* (London : Zed Books, 1995) 14.

[12] (Edinburgh : Edinburgh UP, 1995,) 23.
[13] _____ 16.
[14] See my interview with him in Rajan, ed. *Awaaz: The Authoritative Journal of Kenyan South Asian History Issue III* (Nairobi : Zand Publishers, 2005,) 17-19.
[15] *Orientalism: Western Representation of the Orient* (1978: New York: Vintage, 1994).
[16] _____ 5.
[17] _____ 338.
[18] Recently, in an illumninating review of Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, the critic Leela Jacinto has referred to the Asian African community in East Africa as the 'Other Africans.' This labelling notifies other critics of the problematic nature of the category of Otherness. See her article on www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml ?I=20041227&c=3&c=jacinto « Accessed on 22nd February, 2005 »
[19] Lung'aho, 'The African Prescence in the Novel of Nadine Gordimer : 1960-1990,' M Phil. Thesis, Moi University, Eldoret, 1993; Wa Mungai, 'Self and Other in Selected Novels of Nadine Gordimer,' MA theis, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, 1998. See also Peter Tirop Simatei's, 'Ethnicity and Otherness in Kenya Cultures,' in Bethwell Ogot ed. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Democracy in Africa* (Kisumu: Maseno University College, 1997,) 51-5.
[20] Micere Mugo, *Visions of Africa* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1973); Chris Wanjala, *For Home and Freedom* (Nairobi : Kenya Literature Bureau, 1980); Eddah Gachukia, ''Cultural Conflict in East Africa,'' PhD. Diss, U of Nairobi, 1980.
[21] Said, *Orientalism*, 5.
[22] (London : Andre Deutsch, 1979,) 17.
[23] (London : UCL Press, 1994).
[24] See JanMohamed doctoral dissertation, 'The Politics of Literary Generation in the African Colonial Situation,' University of Brandeis, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1977. The dissertation upon revision was later published as the seminal book, *Manichean Aesthetics*. It is interesting to note the different perspectives that Wanjala and JanMohamed take on the issue of literary criticism in East African letters. They both come from Kenya but JanMohamed emigrated to and teaches in Carlifornia, US.
[25] Appiah, 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism,' 353-4.
[26] Sarup, *Identity, Culture*, 155.
[27] (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993).
[28] ____, 153.
[29] *Triple Heritage: A Journey to Self Discovery* (Nairobi : Colour Print, 1998,) 6.
[30] This is the possible reason why Vassanji went a step ahead to capture this interstitial sense in the title of his recent-most novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (Toronto: New day, 2003). Peter Nazareth also hinted to this interstitial dimension in the title and narration of his first novel, *In A Brown Mantle.*
[31] JanMohamed and Llyod Davis, eds., *The Nature and Context of a Minority Discourse* (New York Oxford UP, 1990) ; Chartajee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, New York: Princeton UP, 1993); Appiah, 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial,' *Critical Inquiry* (Winter, 1991) 337 ; Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988); Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).
[32] See http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bhabha/reviews.html « Accessed on 15th August 2003 »
[33] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* 37-9.
[34] Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, 163.
[35] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 173.
[36] 'Contextualising Anglophone African Fiction: Ngugi and Armah Compared,' Ph.D Diss. U of Glasgow, 2000: 3.
[37] See www.museums.or.ke/asian.html
[38] Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers: The World of East African Asians, 1750-1985* (New Delhi: New Age International, 1996); Rothschild, *Racial Bargaining in Independent Kenya: A Study of Minorities and Decolonisation* (London: Oxford UP, 1973); Pandit, *Asians in East and Central Africa* (Nairobi: Panco Publications, 1963); Nanjira, *The Status of Aliens in East Africa: Asians*

and European in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya (New York: Praeger, 1976); Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa c. 1886, to 1945* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1969); Hollingsworth, *The Asians of East Africa* (London: New York: Macmillan, 1960) ; Gregory, *India and East Africa; A History of Race Relations within the British Empire, 1890-1939* (Oxford: at the University Press, 1971) ; Bharati, *The Asians in East Africa* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall and co., 1972) ; Atieno-Odhiambo, 'The Political Economy of the Asian problem in Kenya,' Mamdani, *From Citizen to Refugee* (London: Frances Pinter, 1973) ; Patel, *Challenge to Colonialism : The Struggle of Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee for Equal Rights in Kenya* (Nairobi : Zand Graphics, 1997).

[39] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 63.

[55] See Susheila Nasta, 'Interview with M.G. Vassanji.' 3. *Wasafiri* (1996): 41-45.

[40] See Deonandan's electronic magazine, www.deonandan.com

[41] See her insightful chapter, 'Mediating Origins: Moyez Vassanji and the Discursivities of Migrant Identity,' in Abdulrazak Gurnah, ed. *Contemporary African Writing Vol.2* (London: James Currey, 1995.)

[42] _____ 63

[43] See her doctoral dissertation, 'Children's Literature in Tanzania: A Literary Appreciation of its Growth and Development,' Kenyatta University, 118.

[44] ____120.

[45] See the introduction of Vassanji's *The In-Between.*

[46] Nazareth, 'The Social Responsibility of the East African Writer,' in his *The Third World Writer and His Social Responsibility* (Nairobi : Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978) ; Sarvan, 'The Asians in African Literature,' *The Journal of Commonwealth Studies* XI 2(1976) : 160-9. Siddiqi's view is evident in her harrowing rerminisce, 'Uganda : A Personal Viewpoint on the Expulsion, 30 Years on.' It was published by the electronic journal *Information for Social Science.* The article is available at http://libr.org/ISC/articles/15-Siddiqi-1.html. and has been republished under the title, 'Haunts of Uganda's 30 Year old Past,' in Rajan, ed. *Awaaz : The Authoritative Journal of Kenyan South Asian History Issue I*, 6-8.

[47] Liyong, *Another Last Word*

[48] See my 'Tradition and Transition : The Tabanic Traditions and Asian African Writers from East Africa,' in Ruth Bett, et.al., eds, *Across Borders : Benefiting From Cultural Differences* (nairobi : DAAD, 2005) 43-63.

[49] This paper was presented at CODESRIA's 10th General Assembly under the Theme 'Africa in the New Millenium' held at the Nile International Conference Centre in Kampala, Uganda between 8th-12th December, 2002. CODESRIA is the acronym of the established Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa.

[50] _____ 12.

[51] This paper was presented at CODESRIA's 30th Anniversary Conference held in Dakar, Senegal between 10th-12th December, 2003. It is available online at www.coderia.org/Links/conferences/dakar/kahyana.pdf. « Downloaded on 17th June 2004 »

[52] (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 2001). This dissertation was submitted in the University of Bayreuth, Germany. Simatei remains, at the moment, the most authoritative commentator on the growing researches into Asian African literatures from East Africa.

[53] Besides his doctoral research, he has made various commentaries through journals on Asian African literatures such as, 'Voyaging on the Mists of Memory: M. G. Vassanji and the Asian Quest/ion' in: *English Studies in Africa* 43. 1(2000):.29-42. It is interesting to note that he was led into this direction of research by Prof. Chris L. Wanjala. This was revealed by Wanjala in a personal interview by the present researcher on 12th February, 2004 in his office at Mokhtar Dada street, Nairobi.

[54] See Sue Kossew and Dianne Schwerdt, eds., *Re-Imagining Africa: New Critical Perspectives* (Huntington, N.Y: Nova Science Publishers, 2001). Ojwang's chapter is the fifth one in this informative book.

[55] Gurnah, ed. *Contemporary African Writing,* Derek Wright, *New Directions in African Fiction* (New York : , 1997) ; Lindfors, *Black African Literatures in English 1992-1996* (Oxford : Hans Zell Publishers; London: James Currey, 2000) and Gareth Griffith, *African Literatures in English : East and West* (Essex : Pearson Education, 2000).

[56] For a detailed discussion on these emerging writers and their works, see chapter on the transcultural voices in African literature, in Griffith, *African Literatures in English*,

[57] Other novels by M. G. Vassanji', besdies the two under study in this work include, *No New Land* (Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart Inc., 1991).; *Amriika* (Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, 1999) and *The Inbetween World of Vikram Lall* (Toronto: New Day, 2003). He has also published an anthology of short stories, *Uhuru Street: A Collection of Short Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1992) .

[58] The book was published in 1998 by Vassanji's own Toronto-based publishing house, TSAR Books. See also Nurjehan Aziz ed. *Floating Borders : New Contexts in Canadian Criticism* (Toronto: TSAR Books, 2000). The book editor is Vassanji's wife and he wrote the thought-provoking forward to it.

[59] See www.tsarbooks.com

[60] We are aware that Vassanji is about to publish a second anthology of short stories based most based in Kisumu, Kenya, where a significant population of Asian Africans dwell. The anthology entitled, *When She Was Queen* (Toronto: Doubleday, October 2005.)

[61] See *Key-Concepts in Post-Colonial Theory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000).

[62] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 139-141.

[63] _____ 362,

[64] See Bhabha, 374.

[65] See his *For Marx.* trans. Ben Brewster, (Hammondsworth : Penguin, 1966,) 228.

[66] (London, New York : Routledge, 1989)

[67] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* 171.

[68] Ashcroft et.al. *Key Concepts,* 193. The three scholars posit that from a postcolonial reading perspective such unspoken subjects [as Asian Africans] may well become the crucial announcements of the text.

CHAPTER 2: IN(BETWEEN) BLACK AND WHITE

[1] See the section subtitled, "Vital Issues in the Criticism of African Literature," in his insightful book, *The Social Experience in African Literature* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1985,) 2. For a discussion of Oladele's view with respect to East African literature, see also Chris Wanjala, *The Season of Harvest: A Literary Discussion* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978,) 2-3.

[2] See Malak's essay, "Ambivalent Affiliations and the Postcolonial Condition: The Fiction of M. G. Vassanji," *World Literature Today,* 67 (1993): 277-82; Simatei, Novel *and Politics of Nation-Building in East Africa*: Bayreuth African Studies, 55; Kanaganayakam, "Broadening the Substrata: An Interview with M. G. Vassanji." *World Literature Today,* 67, 2(1991): 19-35; Kirchoff, "Figuring that Words are the Way to Go: An Interview with M. G. Vassanji," *Toronto Globe and Mail,* 4 March, 1991;Ball, "Interview with M. G. Vassanji," Paragraph: The Canadian Fiction Review, Vol. 15, (Winter, 1993/Spring, 1994); Bardolph, "Negotiating Place/ Recreating Home: Short Story Cycles by Naipaul, Mistry and Vassanji," in Jacqueline Bardolph, ed. *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Fiction in English* (Amsterdam: Atlanta: Nell Publishers, 2001);Elder, "Indian Writing in East and South Africa: Multiple Approaches to Colonialism and Apartheid," in Emmanuel S. Nelson ed., *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (New York: Westport, London, 1992,) 115-39; Ball, "Locating M G Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*: Postmodern, Postcolonial, or Other-wise?" in Nurjehan Aziz, ed., *Floating the Borders: New Contexts in Canadian Criticism* (Toronto: TSAR, 1999,) 89-105.

[3] Anthony Gerard posits, "no work of literary art can be properly understood in total abstraction of its context. It is imperative, therefore that the scholar should first gain real knowledge of the writer's society and its culture." See his *Contexts of African Literature* (Amsterdam: Roldolpi, 1990), 162. The view is reiterated by Professor Elisabeth Mudimbe Boyi, the President of the *African Literature Association* (ALA) in her Presidential Inaugural address of the African Literature Association 28th Conference at San Diego, March 3rd to 7th 2002 observed that "It is interesting today to notice that interdisciplinarity (sic) is encouraged, and that in the study of texts [literary], greater attention is paid to socio-cultural and historical contexts.'

[4] See his excellent and illuminating essay "The Growth of the East African Novel," in G. D. Killam's *The Writing of East and Central Africa,* 231-246. Kiiru's paper, "Aspects of the Novel in East Africa," in Eddah Gachukia and S. Kichamu Akivaga, eds, *Teaching of African Literature in Kenyan Schools* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978,) 91-101. Simatei, *The Novel and Politics of Nation-Building in East Africa* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University; London: Global, 2001). Simetai has actually argued that East African literature, especially the novel, seeks to actively make history because the novelists see themselves as their nations' conscience. This is a fact that cannot be disputed by anyone widely familiar with East African novelists.

[5] Notice the intertextuality between history and postcolonial literature in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation in an interview with Arnold Arteaga entitled "Bonding in Difference" in Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean ed. *Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: Routledge, 1996,) 25-26. Spivak holds that 'history is after all storying." She also points out that the French language has this very idea conveniently captured in the word ***histoire,*** which means both 'history' and 'story.' Her interviewer, Alfred Arteaga concurs with her, pointing out that it works the same in the Spanish word 'historia.' See also S. E. Ogude's, "African Literature and the Burden of History: Some Reflections," in Chidi Ikonne, Emelia Oko and Peter Onwudinjo, ed., *African Literature and African Historical Experiences.* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria PLC, 1991.) 1-6.

[6] See the introduction of his essay "The Novelist as Historian: Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de* Violence Revisited.' In Chidi Ikonne, Emelia Oko and Peter Onwudinjo, ed. *African Literature and African Historical Experiences,* 44. This pact between M. G. Vassanji as a writer and the Asian African community is most evident in the sentiments of the renowned Kenyan Asian African ethnographer Sultan Somjee. He says of Vassanji's recent most novel *The In-Between Worlds of Vikram Lall*, "Reading the book, I felt I know all this; I have lived it; I feel it in my veins," he goes on to remark that, "I feel I have met and worked with the variety of characters among both Asian families and African friends, and breathed the fragrance of the landscapes but Vassanji has put in touching words what a lesser writer cannot do with such mastery." See the book review of this novel conducted by the eminent Kenyan scholar; Evan Mwangi entitled "How New Novel Explores Kenya's Moving History." In Lifestyle Magazine, *Sunday Nation,* 22 Feb. 2004: 12

[7] See Wahome Mutahi's article "Memories of Yesterday's Home," Lifestyle, *Sunday Nation* [Nairobi] 27 Oct. 1991: 13. Vassanji is quoted having said, "Even when you go away, you take your country with you."

[8] See his title essay, 'Locations of Culture' in *The Location of Culture* (New York, London: Routledge, 1994,) 1-18.

[9] *Moving The Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1993,) xv.

[10] See Wanjohi wa Makokha, "Worlds In-Between: An Interview with M. G. Vassanji," in Zahid Rajan, ed. *Awaaz: The Authoritative Journal of Kenyan South Asian History, Issue III.* (Nairobi: Zand, 2005).

[11] *The Location of Culture*, 171.

[12] (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978).

[13] See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming* (London: Heinemman, 1972,) ix. Ngugi has consciously admitted his lack of knowledge of the Asian way of life and even limited his commentary to the White/Black cultural discourse. In the same admission, he argues that this is why he uses stereotypical representation of both European and Indians in his work as a way of communicating his attiitudes towards the two communities. See Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, ed. *Talking with African Writers* (Heinemman, 1972.) 65.

[14] This enunciation alerts us to the possibility that there may be 'other kinds of East African Asians,' such as the prevalent stereotypical figures which Dana April Seidenberg decries in selected works of Okot p' Bitek and Elspeth Huxley. See Seidenbeg's subsection entitled, 'Fanning the Flames of Racism,' in her, *Mercantile Adventurers: The World of East African Asians, 1750-1985* (New Delhi: New Age International, 1996,) 185-8.

[15] See her inspirational, 'Contextualising Anglophone African Literature: Ngugi and Armah Compared,' Ph.D Diss. University of Glasgow, 2000.

[16] "Stepping Out of Segregation: The Changing face of Kenyan Asians," Society Magazine, *Sunday Standard,* 4 Apr. 2004: 5-6.

[17] _____ 6. Although this view finds its expression in a seemingly unacademic medium, a newspaper, it is a widely held misebelief even in scholarly circles as is evident in Yash Tandon's *The Future of the Asians in East Africa* (London : Rex Collings, 1973). See especially pp. 1-4. However, scholars such as Kennedy Otsola argue indeed that Indians have been in East Africa for many years before the coming of the British. He says, 'contrary to popular misconception, the Asians did not all arrive in the British colony [East Africa] as cheap labour for building of the Ugandan railway. Indian ships were calling in at East African ports centuries before the British even knew East Afrcia existed, long before the railway was built.' See also 'The Basic Tenets of the Arya Samaj and its Establishment in Nairobi,' in J.N.K. Mugambi and Mary N. Getui eds. *Religions in East Africa under Globalization* (Nairobi : Acton Publishers, 2004,) 228.

[18] Apter's *The Political Kingdom in Ugaanda: A Study in Bureaucratic Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961,) 164. This view is also reiterated in Tandon, *The Future of Asians*, 1.

[19] For instance in his recent insightful study, 'The Worlds of Gikuyu Mythology: A Structural Analysis,' Ph.D Diss. Kenyatta University, 2001, Michael Wainaina points out that past experiences shows that understanding of folkloric material is hampered or facilitated by theoretical approaches in vogue. On his part, the Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani [himself an Asian African] observes that 'A myth is not a lie. It is based on truth. Only, its tendency is to decontextualize the truth, and to present a version of truth as the truth.' 177. See his ar ticle, 'The Truth According to the TRC,' in Ifi Amadiume and Abdullah An-Na'im, *The Politics of Memory : Truth, Healing and Social Justice* (London, New York : Zed Books, 2000,) 176-183.

[20] Armah gave a lecture at Taifa Hall in University of Nairobi on 17th February, 2005. He later held interactive sessions with students, scholars and literati at the Department of Literature, Kenyatta University and Kenya National Theatre Concert Hall on 22nd February, 2002. For a critical overview of Armah's itinerary, see my article,"Tradition and Transition: The Tabanic Traditions and Asian African Writers from East Africa," in Ruth Bett, et.al. eds. *Across Borders: Benefiting from Cultural Difference* (Nairobi: DAAD, 2005) 43-63.

[21] (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972).

[22] See Rasna Warah, *Triple Heritage: A Journey to Self Discovery* (Nairobi: Colour Print, 1998,) 26.

[23] "Uganda: A Personal Viewpoint on the Expulsion, 30 Years on." The illuminating though tragic recollection is available at http://libr.org/ISC/articles/15-Siddiqi-1.html. « Accessed on 30th April, 2005»

[24] 'Asians in African Literature,' *The Journal of Commonwealth Studies* XI 2(1976): 160-9.

[25] See Singh's Sweet Scum of Freedom," in Gwyneth Henderson and Cosmo Pieterse, eds. *Nine African plays for Radio* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973,) 42.

[26] Vassanji (Nairobi, London, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1989); (Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, 1994; London: Macmillan, 1995); Tejani's (Nairobi: EAEP, 1971); Nazareth (Nairobi, EAEP, 1972); Sondhi, in Cosmo Pieterse, ed. *Short African Plays* (Nairobi, London, Ibadan: HEB, 1973,) 1-24.

[27] Ngugi, (Nairobi: EAEP, 1977); Mbogo, (Dar es Salaam: Heko Publishers, 2002); Rubadiri, (Nairobi: EAPH, 1967); Blixen, (London: Penguin, 1937); Okot, (1953:Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1989).

[28] 'Ethnicity and Alienation: The African Asian and His Response to Africa,' *The Journal of Commonwealth Literatures,* Vol. XX 1(1985) 100.

[29] "An Insight into Asian Conservatism," *The Weekly Review,* 1 Nov. 1991:31.

[30] See Makokha, "The Worlds In-Between,"

[31] See Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa c. 1886 to 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.)

[32] It must be pointed out that of the many historical accounts of the 'Indian community' in East Africa that we have reviewed (see Chapter One), we find Mangat's study a reliable and valuable in-depth study of the immigration and settlement of the community. While the others, only serve as important surveys or introduction to the subject, Mangat, by relying on a combination of data collection techniques and methods to harness primary data succeeds in producing one of the few

serious attempts at a historical study of the 'Indians of East Africa.' The reader will find the preface to Mangat's book useful as a critical review of literature on East Africa.

[33] (New Delhi: New Age International Publishers, 1997.)

[34] See Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 2.

[35] (London: Oxford UP, 1971.)

[36] He points out that by the eve of Partition [under the Berlin Conference of 1884], the Indians were an important element in the economic and political situation." 5.

[37] For a fuller account of statistical data see, Samuel G. Ayany, *A History of Zanzibar: A Study in Constitutional Development 1934-1964* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1970).

[38] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 25.

[39] Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers,* 19-20.

[40] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 22.

[41] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 25. We must emphasis here that Mangat sees these Anti-Asian sentiments as having been the formative elements for later aggression and racist harassment of Indians in East Africa. He says "In the final analysis, however, the adverse criticisms of the Indian community were to provide a precedent for the future and the tendency to use the Indians as a 'scapegoat' was to continue." We discuss this view in more details later in this chapter under the sub-titles "Empowerment and Emasculation."

[42] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 3.

[43] See Lawrence Hollingworth, *Asians in East Africa* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1960,) 16-7. We call it a pioneering book, because we are yet to come across a historical study of the Asians in East Africa that precedes it.

[44] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 22.

[45] For an interesting discussion of this view see Mangat, 22.

[46] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 22-3.

[47] (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979).

[48] See a discussion on this policy in Seidenberg, 20-25. Also see Mangat's chapter two entitled " Beginnings in the Interior, c. 1886 to c. 1902." 27-62.

[49] See Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers,* Chapter two.

[50] In fact Churchill is quoted as having said, "It was the Sikh (and Punjabi Muslim) soldier who bore an honourable part in the conquest and pacification of these East African countries. It is the Indian trader who, penetrated and maintained himself in all sorts of places to which no white man would go or in which no white man could earn a living, has more than anyone else developed the early beginnings of trade and opened up the first slender means of communications. It was by Indian labour that the one vital railway on which everything else depends was constructed. It is the Indian banker who supplies the larger part of the capital yet available...." (cf.) Mangat, 61-62. For a full account of Churchill's account of Indians of East Africa see W. S. Churchill, *My African Journey* (London, 1908).

[51] Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets,* 1-65.

[52] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 98.

[53] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 98-111.

[54] Mangat *A History of the Asians,* 111.

[55] See (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.) See also A. S. Kala, 'The Role of 'Asians" in Kenya's Nationalist Movement,' in R. R. Ramchandani, ed. *India and Africa* (New Delhi. Radiant, 1980,) 204-221.

[56] Rosberg and Nottingham, 39.

[57] Rosberg and Nottingham, 39.

[58] See Mangat 111. See also R. T. Mc Cormack, "Asians in Kenya: Conflict and Politics," Ph.d diss., University of Fribourg, New York. He offers a more detailed analysis of the role of British policy in fuelling Anti-Asian resentment.

[59] See David Cook and David Rubadiri, eds, *Poems from East Africa* (Nairobi, London, Ibadan: Heinemann EB, 1971,) 156-7.

[60] For a discussion of this intriguing politics see Zarina, Patel's insightful *Challenge to Colonialism : The Struggle of Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee for Equal Rights in Kenya* (Nairobi : Zand Graphics, 1997). The speech made by Jeevanjee on his inaguration as the presdient of the

East African Indian National Congress especially highlights the issues that were being contested between the Asians and the Europeans.

[61] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 129.

[62] The role of the Indian printing presses and magazines in the early/formative period of anti colonial politics in early last century has been extensively studied. See for instance, Rosberg Jnr. and Nottingham, *Mau Mau and Nationalism in Kenya,* and also Dana April Seidenberg, *Uhuru and the Kenyan Indians: The Role of a Minority Community in Kenya Politics, 1939-1963* (New Delhi: Vikas Press, 1983.)

[63] Cf. Mangat *A History of the Asians,* 129.

[64]

[65] But I am informed and guided by a view held by Barbara Neale in her informative essay, "Asians in Nairobi: A Preliminary Survey," In W. H. Whiteley, *Language Use and Social Change: Problems of Multilingualism with Special Reference to Eastern Africa* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971,) 334-336. She says "Any study of the Indian community [with reference to East Africa] is an exercise in componential analysis, where language, caste, religion, and other cultural characteristics are used to define the individual, or subgroup, in much the same way as distinctive features are used in phonological studies to define the phoneme... Asians in Nairobi [and the same can be said of Asians in Kenya and Tanzania] are all, or almost all, North Indians and the population is therefore homogeneous than for example, the Asian population of Southern Africa where North Indians speaking Indo-Aryan languages and South Indians speaking in Dravidian languages are found in roughly equal numbers." 334. It is clear thus that although, of different castes and ethnic groupings, the Asians of East African and indeed their descendants whom I term Asian Africans, are more than less a 'homogenous' community that mainly orginate from North/North-western of the former undivided India. Hollingsworth is supportive of such a configuration of the Asians of East Africa as a 'whole' for purposes of academic discourse. See Hollingsworth, *Asians of East Africa*, 5.

[66] See Elspeth Huxley, *White Man's Country: Lord Delamere and the Making of Kenya 1914-1931 Vol.2* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935). See especially chapter five which, is a subjective racialist perspective on the matter and see Mangat, *A History of the Asians* for an objective view.

[67] In Uganda, the Indian question was precipitated by administrative measures that introduced restrictions in trade and segregation of Indians to urban centers exclusively. In German East Africa, wher even the Germans before the First World war had started to adopt an anti-Asian approach to their race relations, the issue of economic rivalry found itself mounting us the colonial government sought to place stricter restrictions to immigrations of Indians from British India to Tanganyika. (I am indebted to J. S. Mangat for these views.) In fact his comment "the Indian Question in Kenya had wider repercussions throughout East Africa" summarily underscores the commonality of problems that beset the Indian community in East Africa as a whole.

[68] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 124.

[69] I am thinking of Bruce Berman's study, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers; London: James Currey; Athens: 1992). Berman's thesis is that the colonial state was shaped by the contradictions between maintaining effective political control with limited coercive force and ensuring the profitable articulation of metropolitan and settler capitalism with African societies.

[70] I have in mind here Mahmood Mamdani and his authoritative work, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Capitalism* (Kampala : Fountain Publishers, 1996).

[71] Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers,* 131.

[72] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 124.

[73] Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 126.

[74] Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers,* 182.

[75] Seidenberg *Mercantile Adventurers,* 183.

[76] See for instance, *The Red Rock Wilderness: A Novel* (New York: William Morrow, 1957).

[77] The nervous conditions that characterize the coming of Independence in East Africa have been ably captured in Ngugi's rightly celebrated novel *A Grain of Wheat.* Vassanji has also talked about this condition from the perspective of his community. See *The Gunny*, Sack, 156-7.

[78] See Mangat, *A History of the Asians,* 131.

[79] For a more critical insight into this issue see Seidenberg, 187.
[80] Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 187.
[81] In Cook and Rubadiri, eds, *Poems from East Africa*, 157.
[82] See the introduction of *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall.*
[83] Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 187.
[84] See Bethwel Ogot ed., *Politics and Nationalism in Colonial Kenya* (Nairobi: Historical Association of Kenya, 1972,) 44-67). This is one of the most convincing arguments of what nationalism really means when viewed indeed as an "ethno-clasifficatory" imaginary.
[85] Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, 188.
[86] Sarvan makes this observation in his essay, "Ethnicity and Alienation," 102.
[87] In his influential study of configurations of the Orient in Western literature, the [late] postcolonial critic Edward Said posits correctly that "Modern thought and experience have taught us to *be sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying, the Other; in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas, in the socio-political role of intellectuals, in the great value of a skeptical critical consciousness.*" (Emphasis added.) See *Orientalism* (1978: New York: Vintage Book, 1994,) 327.
[88] See Seidenberg, *Mercantile Adventurers*, vi. The term "White Africans" is used in the way L. S. B. Leakey uses it in his autobiography, *White African: An Early Autobiography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishers, 1966).
[89] See J. K. S. Makokha, 'Black Intellectualism : The Postcolonial Perspective and Politics of Colour in East African Literature' in John C. Hawley, ed. *India in Africa, Africa in India : Critical Perspectives* (Indianapolis : Indiana UP, forthcoming 2005/6).
[90] A general and obvious case in point here is the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians in 1972/1973, their explusion in the Congo that had taken place earlier. But a more specific case is the case of nationalist Apa Bala Pant who was declared *persona non grata* and forced to leave East Africa in May 1953. Pant, the son of an Indian prince had renounced his kingdom to the state, was sent by the "Afrophilia" Indian nationalist Jawaharlal Nehru in 1948 to Kenya. His duty was "to work behind the scenes to spur on the African resistance movement and to marshal Asian support for it." See Deidenberg 162-168.
[91] Majid in Kuldip Sondhi's "The Undesignated," in Gwyneth Henderson and Cosmo Pieterse, ed. *Nine African Plays for Radio* (Nairobi, London, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1973).
[92] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Groove, 1961.)
[93] *Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: London: Routledge, 1996) 4-5.
[94] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 150.
[95] This interesting paper is a good read for one interested in the subject of Asian African writings. M. C Finn, "When the Other is Another Other: British Orientalism in an East African Context," Halle Institute Occasional Paper, Department of History, Emory University, 1998.

CHAPTER 3: IMAGINED (DIS)LOCATIONS

[1] Ngugi, in an interview with the Nigerian scholar, Aminu Abdullahi in Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse eds., *African Writers Talking* (London, Ibadan, Nairobi : Heinemann, 1972).
[2] (London : Heinemann, 1989).
[3] I owe this view to Rafael Perez Torres in, *Against Margins, Against Myths: Movements in Chicano/a Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 95.
[4] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1-2.
[5] There is an uncanny similitude between this event and that one mentioned in the interview with M. G. Vassanji attached as appendix to this study.
[6] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 9.
[7] Both Joyce and Conrad experimented with the stream of consciousness technique which, forms the technique shared by Salim Juma's narration in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack.*

CHAPTER 4: DUKAWALLAH AS A DISCURSIVE TROPE

[1] See his essay, 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,' in *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994,) 67.
[2] (Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, 1994; London: Macmillan, 1995).
[3] Ngugi, *Petals of Blood* (London : Heinemann, 1975) ; Blixen, *Out of Africa* (London: Putnam, 1937; New York: Random House, 1938; London: Jonathan Cape, 1964).
[4] See Bhabha, 'The Other Question,' 66.
[5] Bhabha has been clear about the importance of metonymic readings within postcolonial studies.
[6] Ngugi, in an interview with the Nigerian scholar, Aminu Abdullahi in Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse eds., *African Writers Talking* (London, Ibadan, Nairobi : Heinemann, 1972).
[7] See *North of South* (London: Andre Deustch, 1978,) 111.
[8] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* 171-197
[9] _____
[10] See Naipaul, *North of South,* 111.
[11] See interview with Ray Deonandan at www.deonandan.com «Accessed on 3rd September 2003 »
[12] Ngugi, *A Grain of Wheat* (London : Heinemann, 1967); Okot, *Song of Lawino* (Nairobi : EAPH, 1966).
[13] Ngugi ,*Weep Not Child* (1964 :London: Heinemann, 1987); Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958 : London : Heinemann, 1996).
[14] See the blurb on *The Book of Secrets* cited from Gurnah's review of the novel in the *Times Literary Supplement.*
[15] In *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994,) 49.
[16] It is important to point out that part of Pipa's sense of in-betweeness can be accounted by the double-agent role he played in the colonial days, especially during the First World War as is captured in *The Book of Secrets.*

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

[1] These two writers are invoked essentially as prominent writers of the East African colonial and postcolonial experiences from the perspectives of the Whites and Blacks respectively. We are aware that the conceptualisation of Huxley as an East African novelist is contentious. Nevertheless, the fact that she writes about a particular and crucial historical epoch in East African can afford her to be conceptualised thus, at least for academic purposes. Suffice to say that bothe Ngugi and Huxley do not write frrom fixed or stable locations of experience. Their constituencies have also becomes radically ambivalent as it becomes clear that there is no homogenous Black or White community in East Africa today.
[2] See for instance Lung'aho, 'The African Prescence in the Novel of Nadine Gordimer : 1960-1990,' M Phil. Thesis, Moi University, Eldoret, 1993; Wa Mungai, 'Self and Other in Selected Novels of Nadine Gordimer,' MA thesis, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, 1998. See also Peter Tirop Simatei's, 'Ethnicity and Otherness in Kenya Cultures,' in Bethwell Ogot ed. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Democracy in Africa* (Kisumu: Maseno University College, 1997,) 51-5.
Arlene Elder, "Indian Writing in East and South Africa: Multiple Approaches to Colonialism and Apartheid," in Emmanuel S. Nelson ed., *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (New York: Westport, London, 1992) 115-39; or Amin Malak's essay, "Ambivalent Affiliations and the Postcolonial Condition: The Fiction of M. G. Vassanji," *World Literature Today, 67* (1993): 277-82.
[3] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, London : Routledge, 1994) 149-50.

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APPENDIX I

BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

MG Vassanji is the pen name of Toronto-based writer Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji. He was born in 30th May 1950 in Ngara, Nairobi in the then Kenya Colony. His family is part of a community of Indians—the Shamsi (Khoja Ismaili) who immigrated to Africa in pursuit of commerce in the early 1800s. Vassanji lost his father, Gulamhussein Vassanji at the tender age of five. The loss made his family to relocate to Dar es Salaam, in Tanganyika Territory (present-day Tanzania) where his maternal relatives lived. In Dar, he completed his elementary and high school education in various Aga Khan Schools. His mother, Daulatkhanu Nanji ran a clothing store in downtown Dar to support him and his four siblings.

M.G. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya where he lived until the death of his father. His family then moved to Tanzania where he attended his primary and high school education. In 1969, Vassanji was admitted to study mechanical engineering at the University of Nairobi—then a constituent college of the now defunct University of East Africa. Vassanji's journey to the West has a more dramatic edge. As a young man, Vassanji managed to purchase a passport under the table in Julius Nyerere's socialist Tanzania and left the country illegally, taking a bus to Kenya before flying on to the United States to study nuclear physics on a scholarship. After many years of hard work he obtained a

graduate and a doctorate degree in physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) and the University of Pennsylvania respectively. In 1978 he crossed the border to Canada and began work at the Chalk River Atomic Power station. He invested eleven years in pursuing his scientific career in line with his training.

Besides, in 1980, he became a research associate and lecturer of physics at the University of Toronto. In the same year, he began to write fiction, having loved storytelling since his childhood in Dar es Salaam. Writing was a way of exploring his own past. 1980 proved an *annus mirabilus* when jointly with his wife Nurjehan Aziz, Vassanji founded *The Toronto South Asian Review* (TSAR)—a non-profit organization that supports South Asian Canadian writers. He is the current editor of the journal, *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* and contributes his short stories to anthologies and other collections on behalf of the organization. After the important publication of *The Gunny Sack* in 1989, Vassanji began writing full time and ended his career in physics. He had also been studying Sanskrit and Indian philology, which were influential in prompting his decisive career change.

Interestingly, Vassanji is not a writer by literary training and was reluctant to take his passion for writing as a serious career alternative until he published his first novel, *The Gunny Sack,* in 1989. The book won him the 1990 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book in the African region. His writing career was to be devoted to telling in neapolitan detail the (hi)story of his people—Kenyans, Tanzanians and Ugandans of South Asian origin, lately referred to as Asian Africans.

The Gunny Sack, is an enchanting, classic chronicle about a young Tanzanian Asian African's search for identity. With his unusual inheritance, a *gunia* full of multifarious ambiguous mementoes, as guide, he seeks his community's past. Although he does not find an ultimate truth, the quest reveals that the legacy of the Asian population is today an interactive and evolving cultural and spiritual reality that invokes a sense of wholeness for its individual members. This profound commitment and interest in his community has been the running theme that unites all his creative works into powerful (re)presentations of his community as an African ethnic group.

Vassanji has published four other novels and a short-story collection: *No New Land* (1991), *Uhuru Street* (1991, short stories), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), *Amriika* (1999) and *The Inbetween Worlds of Vikram Lall* (2003). He is an accomplished and established international literary voice who has been recognised by among others, the Bressani Literary Prize, and the Harbourfront Festival Prize.

His novels set in East Africa, namely *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *Uhuru Streets* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and *The Inbetween World of Vikram Lall* (2003) draw on his experiences and sense of community. These powerful multicultural novels are a rich kaleidoscope of trends from postmodernism to postcolonialism; from episodes of magical realism to a bold fusion of realism and naturalism. Vassanji's houses of fiction are peopled with the old and young, traditional and modern, the assimilated and displaced members of the Asian African community in East Africa. Thematically, his fiction attempts to connect the past and the present, assimilate traditional and contemporary

values, and balance a sense of community with an individual's struggle to belong.

The Book of Secrets (1994), winner of the inaugural and prestigious Giller Prize, views the history of the Asian African community in East Africa from new perspectives—the perspective of a migrant eye. The narrative revolves around a British colonial administrator's 1913 diary, found in Dar es Salaam in 1988. The retired schoolteacher who attempts to explore its entries is overwhelmed by the way, in which the past connects with the present.

The same truth catches up with Nurddin Lalani of *No New Land* (1991). The setting of *No New Land* is Canada, a latter-day destination for Asian Africans of East African who found it "unhomely" to stay and continue being the odd-citizen; the *muhindi*-though-born-bred in Africa. The short-story collection *Uhuru Street* (1992) deals with specific aspects of the Asian African community's life in Dar es Salaam during the period between the 1950s and the 1980s.

His other overseas-based work *Amriika* (1999) details the psychological and physical chaos that a young Tanzanian Asian African émigré finds himself in while adjusting in the US as a new home. In all his novels, Vassanji appears to be creating important questions regarding the nature of the post-colonial voice in East Africa that any serious critic or colonial discourse analyst must address. He seems to be reacting to the oft-asked questions posed by many an indigenous East Africans to his community, "Are you Indian or African? What are you still doing here in Africa after building the railway?"

On the sixth of November 2003 (the day of my departmental presentation of the research proposal that culminated to this study) *The Daily Nation* reported that Vassanji had won yet again the Giller Prize for *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003). This makes him to date the only writer to have won this prestigious prize more than once. This new novel is primarily set in East Africa and deal with the complex interstitial situation of Kenyans of South Asian heritage in East Africa who are neither indigenous Africans nor European colonizers-settlers. Many of them cannot find a familiar refuge on the Indian sub-continent nor in the colonial "home country."

In the attached interview with me, Vassanji pointed out that many Asian Africans couldn't find roots in South Asia—India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. This is because, like himself, some of them are fourth generation Africans after their great grandfathers settled in East Africa as early as 1800s—before even certain sections of the Luhya community had moved into their present-day homelands!

Vassanji joins other great diasporic Indian writers such as the Naipaul brothers, Neil Bisoondath, and Michael Ondaatje in displaying the complex sense of identity of their communities. Asian Africans are seen as alienated from their African homelands regardless of their emotional attachments and legal status resulting to endless quests for Other homelands abroad; mainly in UK, Canada and the US. No other East African writer of Asian descent fused with an African heritage has taken it upon himself to sytematically give the *Muindis* a literary voice exuding both intensity and precision as has Vassanji.

There have been several novels on the plight of Asian Africans in East Africa. But few attempt to shed any incisive light on just what this multicultural, multiracial hotpot actually amounts to on the sense of identity of East Africans of South Asian descent. Writers such as Bahadur Tejani and Peter Nazareth have inevitably addressed the plight of the community in Uganda of the 1960s leading to Amin's expulsion. Idi Amin is actually no more, and no less, than a singular aspect of the eventful lifehistory of the Asian African community in East Africa from its beginnings in early 1800s to the present.

M. G. Vassanji has gone a step further to imaginatively 'transcreate' the worlds of this interstitial community by tracing historical antecedents of the so-called "Asian Question" from a literary perspective. His novels have helped inspire the understanding that Asian Africans have roots in East Africa that date *beyond* British colonialism and the building of the Kenya-Uganda railway in the 1900s.

In this way, he has helped demystify the connection between Asians in East Africa and British imperialism. This connection being the root of prejudice against his community which many indigenous East Africans see as a product and residue of British imperialism. It is no wonder that his fiction seen as an 'ethnopaedia' is indeed valuable to scholars from literature, history, cultural anthropology and linguistics who are interested in the complex, cultural milieus of Asian Africans as a diasporic community. He gives a fine account of lives and experiences of his community not as a racial or class stereotype *a la* local print and electronic media but as an offspring of a combination of intriguing political, historical and cultural factors.

Vassanji currently appears as an East African novelist in various literary encyclopaedias of distinguished world writers such as Ian Ousby's *Cambridge Guide to Fiction in English.* This guide is a comprehensive survey of fiction from the classics of English Literature to the best of modern fiction. He is also featured in bibliographies on influential African writers such as Bernth Lindfor's *Black African Literature in English* volumes. Pundits arguably define M. G. Vassanji as the most versatile Anglophone East African novelist after Zanzibari-born Abdulrazhak Gurnah, Nurrudin Farah, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In October, 2005, Vassanji's latest offering, a collection of ten short stories set in Kenya, Tanzania and Canada entitled *When She was Queen* was published hot on the heels of the Giller Prize-winning *The Inbetween World of Vikram Lall.*

There are several researches on his works that have recently come out of respected universities such as University of Trier in Germany, Makerere University in Uganda and University of Witwaterand in South Africa. Most of Vassanji's books are available in Bookstop—Yaya Centre, and Bookpoint on Moi Avenue in Nairobi or on Vassanji's own website www.tsarbooks.com

APPENDIX II

MG VASSANJI READING FROM ONE OF HIS NOVELS

Photo courtesy of www.gezen.de

APPENDIX III

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2face

The worlds inbetween

AN INTERVIEW WITH MOYEZ GULAMHUSSEIN VASSANJI

BY WANJOHI WA MAKOKHA

Makokha: Briefly give an account of your early life, education, and your family.

Vassanji: These can be found, I think, on the web and on my book. To add a bit more, my great grandfather on my father's side settled in Kibwezi, Kenya in the 1800s; my mother's parents settled in Zanzibar in early 1900s; they later moved to Mombasa, then to Dar es Salaam. I went to the various Aga Khan schools in Dar es Salaam.

Makokha: Did you have a childhood writing experience? In other words, is writing a childhood ambition you have always had?

Vassanji: Only compositions in class, which I loved to do.

Makokha: What literature did you do at school? Does it have any significance to your writing and life as an Asian African writer?

Vassanji: Not much after primary school, because I was in the science stream; however I read a lot; I was at the library every other day.

Makokha: Why and when did you start writing? In other words, did you take a conscious decision to be a writer or was it a gradual development of the childhood attempts?

. . . in college, I kept a journal. I suppose there was a need to express myself, also to write something beautiful . . .

Vassanji: I always wrote a little bit; in college, I kept a journal. I suppose there was a need to express myself, also to write something beautiful. Later, I felt that the experiences I had grown up with needed expression; everything I had read was about people in other places. I started writing short stories in the 1980s; I also began writing a novel. At the same time I was working. When my novel [*The Gunny Sack*] was published in 1989, I decided I would make writing my career, as much as possible.

Makokha: Would you consider yourself a Kenyan writer [by birth], a Tanzanian writer [by nationality], a Canadian writer [by emigration] or an Asian African/Indian writer in the Diaspora?

Vassanji: Obviously all of the above. When we moved to Tanzania [late 1950s], we considered ourselves Kenyans and missed Nairobi a lot. When I was in the US, I considered myself Tanzanian. By this time, my family had moved back to Nairobi, and I would visit every two years, I was

brought up in an Indian community with Indian values in transition. I do not define myself but consider myself a product of everything that went into me. One doesn't have to be one thing or the other; one can be both.

Makokha: Can you comment on the phrase "The In-between Worlds of Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji?"

Vassanji: You could say that it describes me a bit!

Makokha: Multilingualism is a marked feature of your novels set in East Africa: *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *The Book of Secrets* (1994), and *The In-Between Worlds of Vikram Lall* (2003). In these works, a critic notices that you draw from Indic, littoral East Africa's coastal culture, Shamsi-islamic mythos and lore to create your literary idiom and to articulate an ambiguous sense of multiculturalism. Briefly, explain this postulation.

Vassanji: There is nothing more to say; I do find that 'multiculturalism' has become somewhat of a cliché nowadays, especially after governments and academics started using it.

Makokha: What African writers in general and East African writers in particular do you feel close to? Writers whose writings you would say have influenced you as an Asian African writer?

Vassanji: I don't think of influences but of writers I feel close to or those whose works have brought me "comfort". I have liked Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Conrad (although I know many African writers don't like him); I also like Faulkner, Philip Roth; more recently, Jose Saramago, Coetzee (I have reservations but still think he is a great writer), and the author of *My Name is Red* (the name escapes me); Naipaul's autobiographical essays and his *A House for Mr. Biswas* I found wonderful. I like some of Meja Mwangi, for his vivid descriptions of a real Nairobi; and Ngugi has been a great comfort to me.

Makokha: How do you identify with other African writers? For example, do you attend conferences on or by African writers such as those annual ones organised by African Literature Associations?

Vassanji: I do not like academic conferences; and I find that most of these are organized by Europeans and Americans; to them (this is my feeling) an Asian just doesn't belong to the Africa they have conjured up; they have their money and positions and their coteries of Africans. On the other hand, I go to my Dar or Nairobi, identify with the landscape, be it dry grass or a hut, enjoy speaking Kiswahili or simply drinking chai in a banda and listening to banter; and no one there, especially in Dar, even asks me where I come from. And when I speak Kiswahili, the manner of my speech identifies me immediately as someone of the land. What need do I have of a conference?

. . . instead of thinking abstractly, I prefer to write . . .

Makokha: That is interesting...very interesting. As a critic, I notice heavy reliance on your ethno-religious epos in your writing. Is this your aesthetic "core"?

Vassanji: There is no "reliance." These are stories about people. Would you as a critic, have me write about John Smith in London or New York? This is the problem with the colonies, so much are we used to reading about other people, that when writers use their own experiences, colonial critics and readers think the writer has not developed fully. And how about Ngugi—does he rely too much on Kikuyu material? Who else had the courage to give us the Kikuyu experience?

Makokha: In your webpage you say, "Writing has allowed me to keep several worlds inside me without letting go..." How do your "multiple-worlds" or interstitial experience between them influence your identity as a writer and as a subject?

Vassanji: I am not sure; instead of thinking abstractly, I prefer to write. You could say,

however, that from my multiple experiences I can show the complexity of life, people, and places.

Makokha: *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *Uhuru Street* (1992) are set in East Africa, *No New Land* (1992) is set abroad. Then *The Book of Secrets* (1994) is set in East Africa, *Amriika* (1999) which follows is set abroad, then interestingly your most recent novel, The *In-Between Worlds of Vikram Lall* (2003) is set in East Africa. My critical eye discerns a certain alternating pattern in terms of the settings of your novels. Please make a comment on this; in fact, will it not be accurate to project that your next novel will be based away from home? (You know whatever "home" I mean!)

I think the reason was that Asians were brought up in such insular communities that those who wanted to write of their experiences creatively did not know how to do it.

Vassanji: I don't know what to say. After *Amriika*, I felt I would "go home." Also there was the Mau Mau experience that was brewing in me for a decade at least that I wanted to write about.

Makokha: There are a number of Asian African writers who have made [and some still continue to do so] significant contribution to what the established critic Chris L. Wanjala in 2003 christened, "The East African Literary Tradition". These writers who include among others: Peter Nazareth, Jagjit Singh, the late Rajat Neogy, Bahadur Tejani, Jameela Siddiqi from Uganda; Kuldip Sondhi, Zarina Patel, Amin Kassam, K. O. Kassam, Sadruddin Kassam, Rasnah Warah, Pheroze Nowrojee and Dipesh Pabari from Kenya; and Noel Zogre from Tanzania apart from yourself, have through their pen contributed to Wanjala's idea of our regional tradition sui generis. Would you argue for, or imagine the being of 'an Asian African literary tradition in East Africa [or even in Eastern and Southern Africa?]

Vassanji: I always thought that much more could have been done creatively, the way Africans did. There was nothing comparable to Ngugi. I think the reason was that Asians were brought up in such insular communities that those who wanted to write of their experiences creatively did not know how to do it. I liked Amin Kassam's poetry when I read it some years ago; but what happened to him (or the others)? Could Africa completely wash off them, so easily?

Makokha: Food for thought...What is your interest in history with special attention to the historicity of your narrations? In fact, it seems that you purposefully appropriate East Africa's history in the narrative construction of your novels with an East African setting...

Vassanji: This is difficult; I have dealt in communal [Asian African] history, which is more immediate to me, since it deals with questions having to do with my life. I have found that there is very little sense of history in East Africa, in the way it exists in the West. Where is the intimate biography of Nyerere or Kenyatta, giants among us? I don't mean political biographies, which are trivial to write for anyone who has time to research at the PRO [Public Relations Office]. Where are the detailed portraits of the Maji Maji war? In my own case, I didn't know what village my great grandfather came from until this year (I was able to visit it), or where he settled (which I found out in 1983 when I met an old woman in a shop behind the Khoja Mosque in Nairobi).

Makokha: As an East African writer of interstitial origins, do you believe in national or racial categorization of African literature?

Vassanji: No, except, of course, for academic reasons; but categorizations should not be cast in stone and there can be different categorizations of the same work or author, depending on what one wants to point out.

Makokha: Finally, what consensual aesthetic criterion would you say, the judges of the Commonwealth Prize, The Bressani Literary Prize, Harbourcourt Prize and the Giller Prize apply when they decorate your literary achievements, besides the obvious one that an East African reader applies?

Vassanji: I would like to think it is the writing, the execution of the novel, the way history and individuals [subjectivity] intersect, the way life's complexities [such as interstitial dimensions] are dealt with without easy answers.