COPING WITH KHANDAANITY IN DIASPORA SPACES: SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN IN EAST AFRICA[1]

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Abstract

This paper provides a survey on the representation of the female East African Asian in literary texts and poses a series of questions on the role of the South Asian woman in East Africa. It seeks to unravel the extent to which South Asian women created their own space within the rigidly established colonial hierarchy. It examines the portrayal of them by writers such as M.G.Vassanji and Peter Nazareth and, more recently, Jameela Siddiqi as either victims of an equally rigid family structure or active agents in the negotiation of new forms of female subjectivity through taking advantage of the privileged social position of Asians in East Africa. Finally it suggests that women are more capable of actively welcoming the prohibited and the transgressive and consequently dismantling obsolete barriers. However, despite the deconstruction of gender relations in Jamila Siddiqi's work with its embedded critique of the double standards rife within the South Asian community, the paper concludes by observing that the novel that comes to terms with both the female East African Asian's subaltern state as a woman and her privileged social ranking as an Asian is yet to be written.

Keywords: South Asian Women in East Africa, Diaspora Writing, Literary Femaleness.

Resumen

Este artículo da una perspectiva de la representación de la mujer asiática en el África Oriental en textos literarios, y formula una serie de cuestiones sobre el rol que la mujer surasiática tiene en dicha zona. Se intenta descifrar hasta qué punto las mujeres del sur asiático crearon su propio espacio dentro de la jerarquía colonial firmemente establecida. Examina, asimismo, el retrato que de ellas han hecho escritores como M.G. Vassanji y Peter Nazareth y, más recientemente, Jameela Siddiqi como víctimas de una estructura familiar igualmente rígida, o como agentes activos en la negociación de nuevas formas de subjetividad femenina aprovechándose de la posición social privilegiada de los asiáticos en África Oriental. Finalmente, se sugiere que las mujeres son más capaces de asimilar activamente lo prohibido y lo transgresor, y de este modo desmantelar las barreras obsoletas. No obstante, a pesar de la deconstrucción de las relaciones de género en la obra de Jamila Siddiqi con su crítica implícita de los dobles raseros dentro de la comunidad surasiática, el artículo concluye constatando que la novela que trate tanto del papel subalterno de la asiática africana por ser precisamente mujer, como de su ranking social privilegiado por ser asiática, no se ha escrito todavía.

Palabras clave: Mujeres surasiáticas en África Oriental, escritura de la diáspora, la mujer en la literatura.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the settlement of South Asians[2] in East Africa has been narrated almost exclusively as a male experience. The Lall children in M.G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) are third generation Africans, Anand Lal Peshawari, Vikram's paternal grandfather, was one of the many Indians who built the East African railway. We are told little of the grandmother's story, she laid no railway tracks but raised a family in a hitherto unfamiliar territory. There has been a dearth of academic research into the female East African Asian experience but in recent years creative writers of East African Asian origin are filling in the gaps and telling the stories –so often neglected and underestimated– of what Dana April Seidenberg has called "the forgotten pioneers" (93). Male and female responses to the immigrant condition are not –cannot be– lived in the same way. That women's experiences differ considerably from men's is borne out by the following quotation from Avtar Brah in which she describes how diaspora experiences are gender determined:

> Clearly the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was recently left behind, and by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to reorientate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities. Within each generation the experiences of men and women will also be differently shaped by gender relations. (Brah 194)

How have South Asian women created their own space within the rigidly established colonial hierarchy? Do writers such as M.G. Vassanji and Peter Nazareth and, more recently, Jameela Siddiqi portray them as victims of an equally rigid family structure or do they suggest that they have negotiated new forms of female agency by taking advantage, as it were, of the privileged social position of Asians in East Africa? Many of the novels of the writers mentioned above beg the question as to how long one must live in a place in order to claim it as "home." Do women become attached to the new land quicker and less painfully than men? Are they more capable of actively welcoming the prohibited and the transgressive and consequently dismantling obsolete barriers? In this article I wish to address these issues and unravel the role of South Asian women in the construction of an East African Asian community. I will be discussing the work of various East African Asian writers, men and women, but before dealing with them, I would like to outline the sociocultural

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[2] As will be discussed later on, the South Asian diaspora of East Africa is an extremely heterogeneous group, linguistically, religiously and culturally but I am using the term "South Asian" as shorthand.

constraints of what M. G. Vassanji has termed "khandaanity," in other words the concept of honour and prestige that is usually referred to as *izzat*.[3]

Behind the notion of *izzat* lies the fear, control or shaping of women's sexuality as the purity and honour of the family –if correctly upheld– can replace lack of money or social power. Within the South Asian diaspora, the appearance of a monolithic community is maintained in public and calls for cultural purity mean that the usual contradictions and divergences of any lived culture, including those labelled as "traditional," are hidden from the prying eyes of outsiders in the name of unity and coherence. The burden of preserving this image of a homogeneous community, faithful to its ancestral customs and traditions is, to a large extent, placed on the shoulders of the women. Thus the site for the preservation of India, its culture and its traditions, is the family. The domestic space, domain of the woman, is where Indianness has to be affirmed and where honour provides a moral framework for correct behaviour. The Indian woman is expected to be responsible for maintaining the Indian home in the diaspora by remaining true to her Indian womanhood through the preservation of her family's –and therefore the community's– respectability. The diaspora context often encourages a kind of "siege mentality [which] aids cohesion and masks heterogeneity, especially in terms of voices of dissent" (Sen 46) which in turns leads to the glorification of South Asian mores and codes of conduct and an excessive conservatism. This phenomenon is not just confined to Indians in East Africa as it is a common reaction among the various diasporic communities around the globe. Immigrants become frozen in an India of the past and their attempts to preserve their culture translate into rigidly holding on to the values that were prevalent at the time of their departure, ignorant of the fact that Indian society has moved on.[4] The adherence to the strict code of conduct inscribed in *izzat* or *khandaanity* –often with the complicity of women themselves– inform the narratives of the writers, both male and female, that will be dealt with in this article.

2. THE SOUTH ASIAN PRESENCE IN EAST AFRICA

Fiction written by and about East African Asians problematises what sociologist Avtar Brah has called *diaspora space.* Diaspora space refers to the area where people can, so to speak, cultivate their cultural hybridity and their diversity in background, faith and language, through the variety of different responses shown by male and female characters in diverse situations. Brah defines it as

> the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple

[3] Vassanji coins this Hinglish expression from the Cutchi-Gujerati word *khandaan* meaning respectability. See *The Gunny Sack* (83).

[4] I have discussed this phenomenon within South Asian communities in the UK and the USA. See Hand 1999 & 2004.

subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate, and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptively mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition. (Brah 208)

I find Brah's theory particularly appropriate in my discussion as she herself is a Ugandan of Indian origin.[5] Like Jameela Siddiqi and Peter Nazareth, Brah writes from first-hand experience about the upheaval surrounding the forced expulsion of Asians from Idi Amin´s Uganda in 1972. These "twice migrants" (Bhachu, 1985) have been immersed in a complex ontological puzzle as regards their identity and filiation. In Siddiqui's second novel *Bombay Gardens* (2006) Baby, now a resident of Great Britain, muses: "I am only Indian by race. I was raised as an African girl, in a small village in East Africa. And, in my country in East Africa, being Indian had, at one time, been the biggest crime one could commit" (17).

How did an Asian community lay down roots in East Africa in the first place? In the following section I will briefly trace the history of South Asians in East Africa in order to understand the stereotypes that cling insistently to them and which writers like Siddiqi and Vassanji are challenging. The one-dimensional view of Asians as either villains or victims tends to rely too much on the construction of the Asian during British colonial rule, whereas the truth is that East Africa was the focus of Indian trade much before the Europeans ever set foot in either India or Africa. However, it is true that South Asians came to inhabit the African continent, most visibly in South and East Africa, in unprecedented numbers under the British colonial machinery. Since their arrival during the colonial era, they have been haunted by the pervasive stereotype that they came to Africa as "middlemen," serving the interests of the British Empire and forming an exclusive ethno-cultural community that saw itself as superior to the indigenous African. Despite the fact that Salim in V.S. Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River* (1979) states that his family had lived in Africa for centuries,[6] people of South Asian origin like him are read as "Indians" rather than "Africans," and more specifically as "dukawallahs," and, what's more, as collaborators in the British imperial enterprise in East Africa.

South Asians have played a key role in the context of Indian Ocean trade for many centuries. India had long-standing mercantile connections with East Africa as part of the ancient network of the Indian Ocean as early as the first century of the Christian Era. Marco Polo in 1260 AD mentions Gujerati merchants on Africa´s east coast and later in 1497 Vasco da Gama reached Malindi

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[5] In the introduction to her study Brah argues that her own personal life "has been marked by diasporic inscriptions" (1).

[6] "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*" (Naipaul, 2002:12; emphasis mine).

and encountered Indian merchants in Mozambique, Kilwa and Mombasa (see Hollingsworth, 1960; Desai, 1993 & Hall, 1998). Up to the beginning of the 16th century, the Indian presence on the East African seaboard was substantial. Indians clearly played a key role in the area, even though it was limited to coastal contact because they did not penetrate into the hinterland.

After the Portuguese and later the British East India Company established their trade monopoly in the Indian Ocean, Indian economic links with East Africa began to suffer. However, Indian activity and influence developed new forms and the return of the Imams of Muscat to Zanzibar in the early 19th century marked a strong revival of the Indian commercial connection with East Africa and a change in character of Indian association. Indian merchants began to acquire an increasingly important role in the commercial and financial life of the island to the extent that during the sultanate of Sultan Seyyid Said they provided the main banking and financial services. Although they began in a modest fashion as seasonal traders Indians soon spread out to command a vast network of commerce with the growth of permanent Indian settlements, not just in Zanzibar and its sphere of influence but throughout the region. The Imperial British East Africa Company recruited Indian workers and police and employed Indian administrative staff at its various stations in the interior and along the Swahili coast. This extension of Indian trading activity into the interior became particularly marked during the early years of the British colonial era, although the real pioneers were old established merchants in Zanzibar.

Together with the railway "coolies," and partly because of them, the institutions of the British Raj were transplanted along the Uganda Railway: Indian laws, police, postal and currency systems, administrative practices. Recruitment of labour from the Punjab started in 1897 and carried on till 1901, during which period 32,000 Indian workers were recruited for service. The attraction for the labourers to migrate to East Africa lay in the higher earnings that could be earned there for the same type of work as they did in India. East Africa was envisaged as a kind of "America of the Hindu" by the colonial power, who had no qualms about luring unsuspecting Indians to Africa and other parts of the Empire to serve as cheap labour (Lepper, 1915; Tinker, 1977; Elder, 1992). Dhanji Govindji, the patriarch of Vassanji´s *The Gunny Sack* (1989),[7] tells his daughter-in-law: "The railway goes from Mombasa all the way to the lake in the interior, and everywhere the train stops there is an Indian settlement. The line was built by our Indians, every stationmaster is an Indian, and every conductor is also one of ours. Our people are doing well under the British" (GS 37).

The Indian role in middle-grade employment was not only restricted to government services since their activities as skilled staff and artisans steadily expanded, both in

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[7] Henceforth the following abbreviations will be used for the novels discussed in this article: *The Gunny Sack* GS; *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* VL; *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* FV; *Bombay Gardens* BG; *In a Brown Mantle* BM; *The General is Up* GU; *Day After Tomorrow* DT.

private employment and in business. In Uganda the principal export crop was cotton, which was exported mainly to India and in fact the cotton business became virtually an Indian monopoly. With the arrival of European settlers, Nairobi and other places in British East Africa became concentrations of major commercial activity. European-owned workshops, garages and retail stores spread, increasing the demands for skilled Indian workers. The Indians who emigrated to East Africa at the turn of the twentieth century also included educated professional people, such as doctors and lawyers. The largest single influx of 32,000 indentured workers to build the Kenya-Uganda railway was in fact a short-term phenomenon, but which gave rise to the myth that the present Asian population in East Africa are mostly the descendants of the "coolies" (Desai 120), a myth that is widely believed by many Africans, despite the fact that only 6,724 of the original thirty-two thousand chose to remain behind. Thus for at least a millenium the Indian presence in East Africa had been confined to the Swahili Coast, but the first two decades of the 20th century witnessed a rapid growth of the Indian role in the interior of East Africa. In one of his lesser known works, Winston Churchill, at the time under secretary of state for the colonies, appeared to praise the pioneering spirit of the Indian:

> 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 [...] (Churchill 34)

The British imposed legal restrictions on landholding and farming practices which guaranteed the Indians' dominant economic position in the East African colonies, especially in trade and in the towns. Thus trade and craftmanship were relegated to Indians while Africans were encouraged to work in the European agricultural system and to supply cheap labour in the towns that were developing in response to European and Indian activities. In this way a hierarchy of races was encouraged to flourish, which would in no way favour future African-Indian relations in the post-colonial era.

The movement of Asians around the British East African territories would be enshrined in the 1883 Act which granted Indians freedom of movement without restriction and settlement within the British Empire. The 1886 Amendment to the 1883 Emigration Act encouraged Indian immigration into East Africa especially as indentured labour. In 1890 the so-called "Open up the Hinterland Policy" empowered the Indians to move inland. Convergence on colonial territory at the beginning of the 20th Century meant contestation over African space especially since Indians were now moving inland rather than remain, as they had done up till then, in the coastal areas. In a sense, these laws would instigate the consolidation of the vision of Asians as exploiters and colonial stooges, willing to carry out the dirty work of the Europeans, which is really how Winston Churchill saw them.

3. NARRATING IN-BETWEENNESS: FROM RAILWAY COOLIE TO FENCE-SITTER

One of the early, better known novels about an East African Asian is V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) published seven years after Peter Nazareth's first novel *In a Brown Mantle* (1972) and eight years after Bahadur Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow* (1971), neither of which have achieved the literary success of Naipaul's work. Naipaul's focus may not have been specifically the Asian experience in East Africa as in fact his novel deals with what he sees to be the post-colonial chaos of an unnamed country, similar to Zaire under the regime of Mobuto Sese Seko. The protagonist, Salim, leaves his family and coastal surroundings to venture into the interior and set up a shop at the bend of an unnamed river. His experience is, however, an isolated one. He barely interacts with Africa and Africans, he, in fact, lives up to the stereotype of the exploitative dukawallah but without the support of an extended family and community behind him. His Indianness will eventually single him out as a foreigner in the newly independent nation, which he will have no choice but to abandon. Naipaul's character is a loner, whose relationship with Africa is distant, remote, almost calculating (Nazareth, 1995: 68-9).

A Ugandan of Goanese ancestry, Peter Nazareth vividly describes the ambiguous position of the Goans, focussing on their singularity and alienation from Damibian –read Ugandan– society in both of his novels, *In a Brown Mantle* (1972) and *The General is Up* (1991). The *Wagoa* regarded themselves as a cut above the other Indians and in fact refused to be lumped together with the *Wahindi*. Their self-classification above the other Asian communities because of their greater moral integrity is disclosed as the utmost hypocrisy in Nazareth's texts,

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> Ronald [D'Mello] decided to retrace his steps towards one of the Damibian bars and find himself a woman... The Goans were very Victorian. Their girls were expected to be respectable and straightlaced and anti-sensual. The result was that the honest men had to hunt out Damibian women who did not have the Goan problem. (GU 18)

Women in these early East African Asian narratives are virtually invisible, Nazareth´s work being almost exclusively male-centred with the few women who are featured relegated to the role of sensuous African women: "There was nothing like a Damibian woman, Ronald thought. ... The woman and he made some small-talk all the way back home, walking hand-in-hand. The darkness all around felt comforting and Ronald was gradually absorbed into a black womb [...]" (GU 21).

I will return later to the feminization of Africa, echoes of which can be found in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*, tell-tale signs of the erasure of the female Asian presence and the masculinization of Asianness in the East African context.

Bahudur Tejani´s *Day After Tomorrow* goes even further in his romanticising of African cultures at the detriment of the lifestyle and values of the Indian community (Elder 129). Both *In a Brown Mantle* and *Day After Tomorrow* eerily forecast the upheaval of the explusion of the Asians from Uganda in 1972. Tejani is critical of the Asians´ singleminded work ethic, out of touch with the raw sensuousness of African

life. He paints a heartless portrayal of Samsher´s father - the quintessential dukawallah, suspicious of any education that will drag his son away from his real vocation: the shop. Curiously, the optimism inherent in Tejani´s novel vis-á-vis mixed marriages contrasts sharply with the tone of novels published a generation later, such as the social stigma and incomprehension surrounding the love affair of Njoroje and Deepa in Vassanji´s *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* and the down-to-earth humour which reveals the hypocrisy as regards "mixed" relationships typical of Jameela Siddiqi´s work.

Asians, in particular the *dukawallah*, have earned rather unflattering portrayals in much East African writing. Shiva Naipaul wrote in his *North of South* that "nowadays, the Asian is portrayed as little more than a miserly dukawallah who ceaselessly exploited and cheated innocent Africans. His past distorted, he is in the process of being eliminated from the present" (111). Kenyan scholar J.K.S. Makokha (82) has suggested that indigenous African peoples in East Africa inherited anti-Asian sentiments from the British. He argues that "seen contextually through a historicised perspective [they] have become a kind of racialist tradition that is learned like all traditions are, and passed over from generation to generation." In this respect historian Dana April Seidenberg writes:

> 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 ... 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. (188)

Thus, even within the general category of "middlemen" groups, East African Asians constituted an extreme case because they were caught in the racist dynamics of colonial or white settler societies. The almost inevitable antipathy of the underprivileged masses was further exacerbated by the racism of the dominant minority, as well as, of course, by the Asians' assumption of cultural superiority over Africans (van den Berghe 293). Their intense pride in their cultural heritage led them to look upon European culture with ambivalence and accept as axiomatic their ethnocentric belief in their *cultural* superiority over Africans. This notion of cultural superiority is highlighted in *The Gunny Sack* in an anecdote told to Salim by his mother and which curiously occurs in Nazareth's novel, *The General is Up* (1991). In *The Gunny Sack* Kulsum narrates to her sons her theory of creation,

> [God] 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 at just the right time. It came out golden brown, the Asian, simply perfect. (GS 89)

In Nazareth´s novel Arab troops brought in by a thinly disguised Idi Amin, get drunk and abuse the native Africans, "Hey slave! Why did God cook you for so long? Why did he not take you out of the oven when you were done just right, like us?" (GU 40). This creation myth has two obvious readings. One humourous reading is that Africans and Europeans are not quite "right" but perhaps what is more important, the text underscores the in-betweenness of the Asian. The story raises the liminal, interstitial essence of the Asian to mythical heights and Kulsum´s narrative reveals an intense cultural and racial pride in its endogamy. One of the major grievances hurled at the Asians by Idi Amin, the strong man of Uganda after the coup against Milton Obote in 1971, was that they did not intermarry with Africans. While it is true that not many South Asians entered into legal marriages with Africans, Vassanji's Dhovinji Govindi lives with and has a child with an African, Bibi Taratibu. When word gets back to India that "our sons are keeping golis, black slaves in Africa. And there are *children*, half-castes littering the coast from Mozambique to Karachi" (GS 14) Govindi abandons his mistress and marries a Zanzibari Indian. This early liaison and the lost African link is what forms the backbone of the novel. I will be returning to the quest for Africanness later on.

As stated above, contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of East African Asians are descendants of skilled free immigrants. Many came from destitute and low status groups in India and many, if not the majority, experienced a substantial rise in economic and social status in East Africa. Indian immigrants in East Africa tended to belong to one of three main sectors, namely, the civil service, the army or commercial enterprise. The Asians found themselves in a new type of caste system based on skin pigmentation. They experienced upward mobility but also a ceiling on that mobility. They would become a buffer group between the Europeans and the Africans, a convenient scapegoat for both and a highly visible stumbling-block in the way of African "advancement" (van den Berghe 279). Allegations were often levelled against them for abusing their privileges and for general malpractice in these three main spheres. In this respect the Indian merchants with whom Africans dealt were sometimes almost as unscrupulous as the European settlers and bureaucrats in their dealings with them. Austrian-born Hindu monk and anthropologist, Agehananda Bharati, puts his finger on the image that Asians have –possibly unwittingly– constructed for themselves.

> Asians are sneaky, mistrustful, they stick to each other and do not mix with others, they are arrogant, they cheat in business, they are cowards, their houses are dirty, they are obnoxiously thrifty, they lower the living standards of their neighbours because they do not spend money even though they could afford luxuries and encourage other people's wealth; they are clannish, they monopolize trade within their fold, they are not trustworthy in business nor in social matters. (Bharati, 1972: 170)

In this scheme of things, Asians were always well-known even before they were encountered, such is the power and overdetermination of stereotypes. For the European colonial purveyors of negative myths about the East African Asians,

this was mostly a way of perpetuating the existent political arrangements which favoured white settlers.

By 1939 the Indians' place in the Government and society of Kenya had become fairly well stabilized, somewhere in the scale of privilege, power, and prestige between the position of the European community at the top and that of the Arab and African communities at the base. Before reaching this position of segregated but comparable economic and social comfort, the Kenyan Indian population found itself faced with discrimination resulting primarily from European greed for the best land and fear of Indian/ African political affiliation against them. The arrival of independence[8] brought with it a restrictive sense of nationalism linked rather too closely with race. Indians occupied a predominant position in the economic life of East Africa but were politically isolated. The younger generations of Indian settlers did not appear to have much of an economic and social future in East Africa and tended to shy away from political activism. Strong apprehensions of post-independence social and economic difficulties were felt by the *duka* owners all over East Africa. Owned almost exclusively by Gujerati-speaking Asians, they were slowly being crowded out by African cooperatives and by the increasing boycott from former African clientele. Only the top industrialists and the very few large-scale Indian farmers seemed to have a clear future ahead of them. Independence constitutions in the new East African nation states made generous provisions for citizenship – a person could become a local citizen automatically on independence or could have the option to become one within a specified time or retain his/her pre-independence status. The entire future of the Asian community would hinge on that crucial choice and the much publicised hesitation earned them the unflattering epithet of "fence-sitters."

Political turbulence in the region, which culminated in the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar, contributed to a general feeling of insecurity among the Asians. The decision to retain British or Indian citizenship arose from the fear that to give this up would be tantamount to giving up the right to any kind of protection in the event of confiscation of property or persecution. The general rush as the period of grace drew to a close led many Africans to see the Asians as opportunists and 'paper citizens,' only becoming citizens to avoid the adverse effects of Africanization (Simatei 75). Africanization policies were carried out in countries like Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and, most notoriously, Uganda, where the Asians were unceremoniously expelled in 1972 and their possessions expropriated. Many of these Uganda Asians migrated to Britain, India and Canada (Bhachu; van Hear). The Indians of Britain's East African colonies were as much a part of the colonial structure as the British themselves, despite the fact that in the post-independence era they themselves would suffer the consequences of fear, hostility and plain envy. Traditional imperial history has failed to do justice to the intricacies of the tripartite social situation

[8] The first of Britain's East African colonies to achieve independence was Tanganyika in 1961, followed by Uganda in 1962, Kenya and Zanzibar in 1963 and Malawi in 1964. Tanganyika and Zanzibar joined to form Tanzania in 1964.

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in these colonies by oversimplifying an elaborate hierarchy of races, promoted by the colonial masters themselves for their own political purposes. As South African based Kenyan scholar Dan Ojwang puts it, "the Asian diaspora has, throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods, acted as a scapegoat for the complicated ways in which East Africa has become drawn into modernity" (2005: 5). It also has to be said that the Indian diaspora was based on the principle of self-gain and that there is a sinister side to it, namely the Indian involvement in the financing of the slave trade in Zanzibar (Hollingsworth 29; Salat 169).

One of the early Asian settlement areas in East Africa was Zanzibar and it features as a powerful site that poses a direct challenge to the "myth of the railway coolie." It is significant that Vassanji has his patriarch begin his new life precisely in Zanzibar, "[w]here Indians had lived and traded for centuries" (GS 11). The presence of the ancestors of present-day East African Asians in Zanzibar even before the British set foot in Africa proves the long-lasting genealogy and belongingness of the community. Notwithstanding these historical credentials, the citizen status of the Asian exploiter –invariably male– is questioned not just because he is sabotaging the progress of East Africa, but mostly because he is perceived as a foreigner, a stranger who has no right to plunder his country of adoption. Following this logic, no one casts any doubt as to the citizen status of the black exploiter (Kahyana, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, the Indian participation in African nationalism was seen to be excessively lukewarm, with notable exceptions such as Isher Dass,[9] who in 1929 accompanied Jomo Kenyatta, then an emerging leader, to London to present Kikuyu problems before the imperial government and the four Indian lawyers who participated in the defense of Jomo Kenyatta at the Kapenguria trial in 1952-3 during the emergency (1952-1960). Jay in Mira Nair`s film *Mississippi Masala* (1991) bitterly complains of the treatment meted out to him by the Ugandan government in 1972 and refuses to accept the Africanization policy which stated that "Africa is for Africans, black Africans." He considers himself to be as Ugandan as his childhood friend Okelo and argues that as a lawyer he had defended Africans against Indians. M.A. Desai, the editor of *East African Chronicle*, helped to print articles in Swahili for Harry Thuku (the father of African nationalism in Kenya) and Makhan Singh, who organised the Labour Trade Union of East Africa in 1936, was the founder of African trade unionism. The stumbling block to more fluid relations with the Africans was the Asians' privileged class position which did not allow Indians to fully identify with African nationalism and therefore did not earn them any significant degree of political legitimacy and respect in the eyes of Africans (Jain, 1993).

The Devonshire Declaration of 1923 had denied Indians racial equality with whites and condoned the continuation of all existing disabilities. This had meant that any European aspiration to achieve self-government as in other parts of southern

[9] In Neera Kapur-Dromson's memoir, *From Jhelum to Tana*, Isher Dass is remembered for his presumed complicity with the colonial government and was in fact murdered by two Indian workers in 1942 (2007: 243-245) and see Hand (2011).

Africa would be frustrated, and that colonial society in East Africa would clearly be constructed in a rigid hierarchical fashion. The Africans in general terms viewed the Asians with growing distrust and hostility, no doubt encouraged by Europeans' propagation of stereotypes of Asians as exploiters of Africans in order to prevent any kind of subaltern solidarity from taking root. If the truth be told however, V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, the Indian liberal politician, was one of the many exceptions that proved the rule. He was an ardent campaigner for African paramountcy and lectured all over India in order to promote African –as opposed to Indian– interests in Africa during this period (Park 352). Despite these significant political actors, the racial stratification firmly entrenched in East Africa, together with the Indian propensity to social exclusiveness, merely reinforced their weak political position and general isolation. In Vassanji's novel, Vikam Lall reflects on how, after independence, the comfortable situation of the Asians would act against them: "Here I was, a young Asian graduate in an African country ...carrying ... the stigma from a generalized recent memory of an exclusive race of brown "Shylocks" who had collaborated with the colonizers...Black chauvinism and reverse racism were the order of the day against Asians" (VL 276).

What Homi Bhabha has termed "in-between" spaces[10] are the meeting grounds where different cultures converge and interact. They are also arenas for establishing new forms of commonality and for challenging monolithic interpretations of indigeneity. The question "who belongs?" follows on from "how long does one need to live in a place in order to belong?" One of the major hurdles that East African Asians were to face –and by extension many diasporic communities– was the notion of Africanness being equated with blackness and as opposed to whiteness. Being African was not being white, in which case where does that situate the brown? Brown Africans were forced into a shady, borderland zone from which they had to contend with establishing their cultural credentials – the title of Nazareth´s first novel, taken from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, exemplifies this perfectly.[11] On one hand, they needed to distance themselves from the African labourer while on the other, they could not identify too closely with the white ruling elite as they were themselves colonized peoples. Both white and black were the Other and this propelled them into carving out a clearly defined Indian space for themselves. This "in-between" space would become a buffer zone for the Africans and the Europeans with the Indians uncomfortably lodged in the middle or falling between two stools, as Salman Rushdie calls it in his *Imaginary Communities* (15) In subsequent years

[10] "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" (Bhabha 1-2).

[11] "Who is the third who walks always beside you?/When I count, there are only you and I together/ But when I look ahead up the white road /There is always another one walking beside you/ Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle" (quoted *BM*, p. viii).

their reduced numbers and the parallel growth of the African middle class have considerably eased the pressure on them in this respect.

Despite the pioneering efforts of Tejani and Nazareth, among others, possibly the most complex literary constructions of the South Asian diaspora in East Africa are to be found in the work of M.G. Vassanji, himself a living example of hybridity. Born in Nairobi of parents of Gujerati Indian descent, he grew up in Dar es Salaam, studied in the United States and now resides in Canada. His work has contributed enormously to the visibility of the Asian communities in East Africa, ranging from his first novel *The Gunny Sack* (1989) through to his most recent novel to date, *The Magic of Saida* (2013) not forgetting his short story collections, *Uhuru Street* (1992) and *Elvis, Raja* (2005). In an interview given in 1991 Vassanji stated one of his motives for writing about the Asian community in East Africa:

> people in East Africa [...] don't have [...] a historical sense, of where they come from. There is a vague kind of oral history telling them where they come from but it's not something that you read about; it's something that's constantly changing, and if you just compare it with what goes on in the West where everything is recorded you can see that our lives have not been recorded. (Nasta 19)

In the case of the East African Asians, the task ahead is not merely that of recording histories but rather it is a twofold enterprise –challenge stereotypes and map Indo-African pasts– so Vassanji's novels undertake a two-stranded objective. First, they narrate the genesis and genealogies of East Africans with cultural roots in the Indian subcontinent. Many of his works, and in particular his first, *The Gunny Sack*, embrace whole sectors of the Asian communities and large areas of Asian settlement. He is by no means confined to any one country as, of course, before and during the colonial period, national frontiers had little, if any, significance. Second, Vassanji seeks to subvert and deconstruct the stereotypical image of the Indian settler in East Africa by revealing a whole complexity of characters, situations, political positionings and motivations. His characters range from the ubiquitous shopkeeper (for example Pipa in *The Book of Secrets*) to high-ranking political advisers (Vikram Lall), from Ji Bai, the owner of the gunny sack of the title to a pharmacist (Deepa, Vikram Lall's sister). He focuses on what he calls the Shamshi community, modelled on Ismaili Muslims, but his novels feature Goans as well as Gujerati and Punjabi Hindus. His is an overarching project but what is called for is a counter narrative in the sense proposed by Bhabha: "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 [...]" (149).

The Asian contribution to the independence struggle is only recently being acknowledged.[12] Two novels that rewrite the histories of East Africa from 1885 to the present from the perspective of the forgotten Asian pioneer and nation-builder are Vassanji´s *The Gunny Sack* and *The In-between World of Vikram Lall*. African attitudes and views of the Asians arose largely out of the political, social and economic context of colonial society in which the Europeans manipulated attitudes against the Asians, which may explain, in part, African reluctance to view the Asian as a fellow Kenyan, Ugandan or Tanzanian. Asians themselves were manipulated to act as middlemen, and took the blame for an exploitative colonial system: "Wittingly or unwittingly, the Indians became the handmaidens of modern capitalism in East Africa, a role they would later come to rue as social conflicts increased" (Ojwang, 2005: 7).

It is also true that the social customs and way of life of the Asians themselves did little to ingratiate them with the Africans, even though East African Asians have departed to a certain extent from traditional Indian culture and have become Africanized as well as Europeanized – one could indeed speak of a process of *hybridization* unlike in South Africa where the African influence on the Indian community has been less pronounced, due, obviously, to the apartheid regime which promoted the separation of the country's ethnic groups. East African Asians speak Swahili especially on coastal and island areas such as Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam and Mombasa and the number of loan words from Swahili that have crept into languages such as Gujerati and Punjabi is considerable, while South African Asians are becoming English-speaking South Africans. Politically South African Asians have a longer history of organized resistance to oppression. Since 1890s they have opposed white minority rule but mainstream Asian politics in East Africa was more conservative and sectarian than in South Africa. Some radical Indian leaders identified with African demands (for example the Kenya Freedom Party for the 1960 elections), but generally Asian leadership, despite opposing the white settlers, followed a policy of extracting concessions from the colonial government by collaborating, however grudgingly, with it. The South African Indian Congress was a radical movement while its East Africa counterparts were reformist. The dominant reaction to the Kenya war of independence and accelerating pace of change in late 1950s was one of "increasing fear and ambivalence towards African demands" (van den Berghe 289). It is this ambiguity and complexity that Vassanji deconstructs in his writing.

[12] The increasing visibility of Asian Africans can be verified by the continuing success of the magazine *Awaaz*. The magazine is principally concerned with the dissemination of both historical and current information on the South Asian community in East Africa, and in Kenya in particular. *Awaaz* reaches out beyond the Asian community as Kenyans of all ethnic backgrounds, as well as people living abroad, count among its readership. Its multicultural credentials are proved by its sponsorship of an Asian-African cultural event called the "Samosa" Festival (which is an acronym for *South Asian Mosaic of Society and the Arts*) and which aims to participate more fully in the mainstream social and cultural life of Kenya. However, it must be said that the editors and contributors to *Awaaz* may be more radical and more committed than the Asian community as a whole, who remain the backbone of Kenyan´s business circles and continue to reside in the more affluent suburbs of Nairobi, far from the poverty and squalor of much of the capital. See http://awaazmagazine.com/.

In East Africa people of South Asian descent tend to be referred to as "Asians" not Indians or Pakistanis. "Asian" has become an East African synonym for all domiciled people of Indian or Pakistani origin, while "Indian" seems to be applied to guests or temporary visitors from India. In his social survey of Asians in East Africa, Agehananda Bharati claims that "there is virtually nothing of sociological significance about the minority which would hold for all its constituent groups" (Bharati, 1965: 15). The Asians are not really a "community" as they are fragmented into a multiplicity of religious, linguistic and caste groups. They include Hindus, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Roman Catholics and Protestants. They speak Hindi, Urdu, Gujerati, Tamil and Telegu. Yet there is a sense in which East African Asians are a community–in colonial times they were a racial caste of intermediate status between the colonial masters and the "natives;" they played the role of "Jews," i.e. scapegoated, pariah minorities of middlemen. So the community is a product of outside forces in the larger society (van den Berghe 277) and the shared experience of rejection, prejudice and scapegoating forms the basis for solidarity and group consciousness. Asian communities came to realise that the only means of survival in post-colonial East Africa was to unite despite their internal fissures because where "everyone else saw "Asian", the Asians saw Shamsi, Bohra, Ismaili, Hindu, Sikh, Memon, Ithnashri" (GS 178). East African Asians are a highly urban group with 80-90% of people living in urban centres, and they are concentrated in mercantile, service, clerical and industrial occupations. They have remained a small minority, in part because of severe limitations on immigration once Africans replaced them in low-skilled occupations but at the same time a highly visible minority (van den Berghe 279). Altogether, they are characterized by their high degree of urbanization, relative wealth, physical distinctiveness, enforced ghettoization, exotic culture and style of dress, endogamy and sectarianism. Paradoxically, such a group hemmed in geographically, economically, culturally and socially has unwittingly created the impression of physical omnipresence, economic affluence and occult omnipotence, which is actually the result of the immense power of the distortion of racial prejudice. Treated as a pariah caste, Asians organized their ghetto existence along pre-existing lines of solidarity, i.e. religion, language and *jati*. Van den Berghe calls them a "bewildering diversity of little endogamous and mutually mistrustful groups" and claims that "the Asian 'community' is, in fact, a culturally modified (and often impoverished) microcosm of the great Indian kaleidoscope" (van den Berghe 280).

4. BEYOND THE RESTRICTIVE BOUNDS OF KHANDAANITY

The Gunny Sack (1989) can stake a claim as the founding narrative of East African Asians as in this novel Vassanji appears to acknowledge the strong influence of women on their respective communities, Ji Bai being the source of the gunny sack of the title from which Salim will extract momentoes and build up his own personal history. Indeed, Neloufer de Mel states that Vassanji "centres marginal voices by uncovering what patriarchy usually absorbs" (de Mel 169). By and large

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this is true but a close look at his first novel reveals an interesting male diaspora discourse, which never quite succeeds in obliterating the female role but which relegates it to the backstage. The settlement of South Asians in various parts of East Africa is narrated from a very masculine perspective, which, at times, is even a curious indentification with the European colonizer: "We Indians have barged into Africa with our big black trunk, and every time it comes in our way. [...] I should have come with a small bag, a rucksack. Instead I came with ladoos, jellebis, chevdo. Toilet paper. A woollen suit. And I carried them on my head like a fool" (GS 250-1).

The rigidity of the big, black trunk with its almost phallic resemblance contrasts vividly with the gunny sack –a far more practical and flexible container to carry around– which will clearly provide Salim with more meaning and understanding than his trunk. This quotation refers to Salim's initiation at Camp Uhuru where he is sent to do his National Service. The masculinization of the Indian in this extract is an unexpected development of the colonial trope of the conquered territory as feminine and the coloniser –invariably European– as masculine. Early on in Vassanji's novel the language employed to describe the African landscape and its people evokes nineteenth century orientalist narratives. Dan Ojwang points to the "imperialist, patriarchal discourse of a feminized, submissive Africa" (Ojwang, 2000: 45) in Salim's reconstruction of Dhanji Govinji's first encounter with East Africa, which also alludes to an enticing, alluring Africa, full of erotic promise:

> The wise and enterprising sought other frontiers; the rest stayed on, enchanted by the island's [Zanzibar's] perfume and musk and spice ... the soft rustling movements behind silky veils, the giggles behind lattice screens ... the mysterious look of two eyes through the slit in a veil, chilling you to the heart and then with a movement of the lashes commanding you, "Come" and you follow the trace of the halud through the teeming streets to wherever it will lead you, ready to lay down your life for its bearer. (GS 11)

Moreover, the African landscape is constructed as a fertile ground where the –in this case, Indian– explorer-conqueror can sow his seed. The use of the trope of the womb is a telling one and suggests a future hybrid relationship not devoid of ambiguity: "Matamu [...] 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" (GS 48).

This feminization of a mysterious, unfathomable Africa in the early days of Indian settlement in the interior smacks of Conradian hearts of darkness, "One could go deeper and deeper into [Africa] and perhaps never return" (GS 39). Salim's grandfather, Huseni, the son of an Indian father and an African mother, finds affinity with his African heritage and abandons his father, now appropriately married to an Indian wife. His father laments the loss of his son who he feels has been irretrievably drawn into identification with his African mother alone: "[Dhanji Govindji] was resigned and wistful. Africa has swallowed him up, Bai, taken him back into her womb [...]" (GS 39). The male narrative is obliged to overstate the courage of the first settlers who –without the acknowledged accompaniment of any women– wrote

their names on the blank pages of African territory and paved the way for future urban development: "the pioneers [...] struck out in the wilderness in the wake of the railway, shopkeepers to their compatriot coolies, artisans, stationmasters and infantrymen, before finally making their homes in the new capital Nairobi" (GS 76).

The ideology governing gender relations at the turn of the twentieth century, which witnessed a large influx of workers from India to build the Uganda railway (1897-1901), continued to be based on the necessity to control and safeguard women's sexual purity, men's honour and social status being heavily dependant on it. In the East African context this translated into an excessive enclosure of the various Asian groups within their own communities for fear that their daughters (or wives) would be led astray by African men. Jameela Siddiqi seems to prove the truth of this in the easy seduction of Mohanji´s once innocent daughter-in-law by her African house-boy. Of course Siddiqi´s purpose is to reveal the double standards behind *khandaanity*. Appearances had to be preserved, grandchildren needed to be born, hence the lightning courtship and hurried marriage of Mohanji´s favourite son, unexpectedly followed by the premature birth of an extremely dark-skinned baby. As the defeated father-in-law admits, "No price is too big a price to pay for the conservation of family izzat" (FV 24). This cultural exclusivity was further underscored by the growing racial segregation instigated by the British colonial government. Women´s purity was worshipped at the altar of tradition and it led to girls being groomed for the only career that was left open to them: marriage and motherhood. In the first half of the twentieth century there is nothing specifically Asian about this as working outside the home –and even less following a professional career– were options open to a minority of women anywhere in the world. What is of interest in the East African Asian context is the constantly lurking fear of miscegenation, with the African male cast into the role of potential ravisher. This led to an overprotection of young women who "had to be married off as early as possible [because] [...] every drop of [a daughter´s] menstrual blood descended on her father´s neck like the blade of a guillotine, and to avoid death by such a gruesome method, elaborate dowries were arranged from day one" (FV 13).

During the years of indentured labour in East Africa, there was a scarcity of Asian women, unlike the plantation colonies, such as Mauritius and Trinidad, where men and women migrated together. Despite being officially frowned on, many Asian men had long-standing relationships with African women. However, the arrival of Asian women during the second decade of the century reinforced the ethnic network and interethnic marriage. This situation calls to mind the changing attitude of the British in India at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the arrival of the memsahibs put an end to any sexual relationships –official or otherwise– between white men and Indian women. The British closed in on themselves and became a close-knit caste-like group which lived in dread of the threat of the lascivious Indian male. In East Africa it would be the African who would represent a similar sexual menace for Indian womanhood. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown suggests this similarity in her autobiography *No Place Like Home* (1995),

> The children of the black/Asian liasions would be called *chotaras*, a word that we used to denigrate people and describe anyone who wore bright colours like luminous pink and green. Terror of contamination and failure encouraged the transformation of Asian women into porcelain ornaments, symbols of purity and wealth, exactly like middle-class Victorian women. (1995: 57)

Standards of sexual purity were less applicable to men and certainly the attraction of the African woman was understood and even condoned. The Asian male, so solicitous of his wife's and his daughter's chastity, was less likely to curb his own inclinations when the "shameless" African woman threw temptation in his way, as Nazareth's novels have shown. Vassanji's Salim, himself a descendant of a mixed race sexual relationship, finds himself both fascinated and terrified at the sensuous possibilities offered by African women. At a festival he attends with Edward bin Hadith, the tailor and one of his mother's admirers, he feels

> Behind me, around me, as I watched my friend dancing, the crowd pressed in, black bodies I'd never been so close to, scent of soap, of perfume, of sweat, flaps of buibui fanning my hot dusty face, soft warm curves of women pressing through filmy buibui, enveloping, inviting, absorbing as I stood there senseless in the heat, the flying dust, the odours, all the while my dukawallah hand clutching the hard silver shilling in my pocket that would take me home. (GS 185)

Emigration, whether as a free person or as an indentured worker, involved economic gain and social and geographical mobility but for women, their lives tended to remain as cloistered and as circumscribed by the family as ever. Women's responsibilities centred on managing the home and bringing up the children. It is only relatively recently that any attempts to reveal the circumstances surrounding the lifestyles of the Asian women who settled in East Africa have been undertaken. Diaspora narratives have been almost totally concerned with men's exploits from the humble but dogged dukawallah providing commodities in the remote areas to the educated political activists in the urban centres. Considering the enormous importance given to marriage and the social disapproval of celibacy, it stands to reason that behind, or next to, every dukawallah, there stood his hard-working wife. If little has been written about the dukawallah as an individual, even less is known about his wife's, mother's, daughters' or sisters' experiences, hopes, fears, or expectations in the diaspora. Siddiqi attempts to set the record straight through her portrait of Mrs. Mohanji, "a quiet unassuming woman who rarely spoke in the presence of men" (FV 160) but who "seemed to possess the greatest wisdom and sensitivity in terms of dissecting the many finer nuances of human nature" (FV 161). Mrs. Mohanji's firm belief in dignity actually turns out to be an excuse to pass the burden of the household onto the shoulders of her widowed daughter, returned unceremoniously to her father's home. Her daughter could hold her head up high as she now was in charge of running the household while she could spend her time weaving and performing "various protracted, lengthy religious rituals" (FV 161).

Marriages, of course, were arranged between families with similar backgrounds but, as mentioned above, until a sizeable community of eligible young

people were available in East Africa, many young brides were sought in India and for these women marriage also involved emigration to a new, unknown land without the comfort and support of familiar surroundings. A fictional portrayal of one of these young girls who came directly from India to join their newly married husbands in East Africa is Sheila, Vikram Lall's mother. Marriage tended to mean economic dependence on the in-laws, hence the importance attached to a bride´s jewellery, which would serve her as a kind of insurance policy should the need arise (Seidenberg 99). During the expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972, hundreds of women left the country weighed down with their bridal finery and gold as in some cases they were not allowed to take anything except the clothes they wore. Jameela Siddiqi gently pokes fun at the hastily departing Asian women: "Although supposedly dispossessed, homeless and destitute, no other chapter in history had witnessed such heavily laden refugees – heavy with worry about an uncertain future, but even heavier with weight of gold" (FV 281).

Until the years following the independence of the former East African colonies and the increasing implementation of Africanization policies which were aimed against the more prosperous members of the Asian community, few Asian women had paid employment. The home was, for the majority and in particular for the more economically privileged, the nucleus of their aspirations. In accordance with an ideology of gender that becomes so ingrained that the women themselves can justify and defend their own social and spacial constraints, middle-class Asian women in East Africa, pampered by servants who did everything for them, considered themselves a cut above other women –especially those who worked– precisely because of their enforced idleness. There were, of course, notable exceptions to this leisurely life-style. Many Asian women provided the economic support for their families whenever husbands died, were absent or failed to fulfill their traditional role as breadwinners. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's father was significantly below standard in this respect. Her mother often relied on the goodwill of neighbours to eke out a living. Likewise, Asian women in the more remote parts of East Africa were poles apart from the carefree middle-classes in the cities. The stereotype of the dukawallah holding the fort for the cause of progress is invariably male, by which the help, support and comfort provided by the female pioneers is, with a sweep of the pen, erased from the narrative. In a similar way to the experiences of many early women migrants anywhere in the world, the hardships and alienation suffered by these women in East Africa have been, in general, unrecorded and underestimated.

Contact between Asian women and indigenous Africans was limited to orders issued to servants, in the case of the middle-classes and brief exchanges during the course of a sale in the case of shopkeepers' wives. Socially, there was little, if any, contact among the middle and lower classes, as Asian women were painstakingly cocooned within their community and discouraged –if not openly prohibited– from establishing friendships with the blacks. Women were seen as "potential war booty [and] stand out as the markers of ethnic and racial boundaries, to be vigorously defended from the external threat" (Ojwang, 2000: 58). As is often the case, the women themselves were the most vigilant when it came to observing the limits of modesty and respect. Awal, the stepmother of Juma, the father of Salim, the narrator

of *The Gunny Sack*, keeps her daughters-in-law perpetually on their toes: "'If your pachedis keep slipping off your heads, use a nail,' she would rail, in her constant efforts to preserve her home´s khandaanity: that snobbish form of respectability which every family, however crooked, lays claim to" (GS 83).

As women were the guardians of culture and the transmitters of traditional values –whether they believed in them or not– any sign of rebellion in a daughter or daughter-in-law had to be crushed immediately (Hand, 2011: 108-110). Mr. Mohanji, Jameela Siddiqi's caricature of the stingy dukawallah, is shocked out of his senses when his new daughter-in-law has the audacity to demand time off from the shop in order to go out with her new husband alone together. He proceeds to lecture her on good dukawallah behaviour:

> We don´t go to dinner parties, and we don´t invite people to dinner. If they drop in at food time, then they´re welcome to join us. We only issue invitations for weddings and for virgins´ feasts. We don´t mix with the snooty Asians who live in the European area. We only do business with them. They come to the shop and buy their groceries. We ask after their health, they ask after ours, and that´s it. We don´t concern ourselves with their big talk of poetry and politics. We stick to our own kind. Like decent people, we eat dinner in our own house and then call on someone of our own community, just for a chat, and we never take more than a cup of tea in anybody´s house. Those are our rules. That is how we live. (FV 221)[13]

Jameela Siddiqi, in her two novels both of which are set in multiple locations including a thinly disguised Uganda, has completely reversed any image of the demure, obedient South Asian woman. *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* features a divorced woman, a rebellious daughter-in-law, a child of ambiguous sexuality, as well as mixed race sexual encounters and a Hindu-Muslim elopement. Siddiqi's first novel, and to a lesser extent her second, *Bombay Gardens*, are made up of a series of vignettes which narrate, what appear to be, totally unconnected stories. *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* contains four different time frames which, as the novel progresses, finally converge into "a typical senseless Bollywood lost-and-found disaster," (319) or rather do not, as it turns out that Siddiqi has so successfully blurred the frontier between reality and fantasy that what we have been reading is a film script and not a real life tragicomedy at all. One of the frames relates the childhood in Uganda –called "Pearl" in the novel– of an eight-year-old child, commonly referred to as the Brat around the time of the forced emigration of thousands of people of South Asian descent. The Brat's mother is a middle-class, theoretically liberal Muslim who carefully draws a line between herself and the shopkeeping class, epitomized by the Mohanji family. The second frame centers on the friendship between Ash, an East African of mixed parentage struggling to write his first film script, and Sonia, a white, Urdu-speaking former SOAS graduate, who makes a success out of every project, however bizarre, that she sets her mind

[13] The social importance of food and cooking amongst Asians is brilliantly described by Alibhai-Brown in her more recent memoir (2008) and see Hand (forthcoming).

to. The third, much smaller frame, is the story of a nineteenth-century courtesan, Tameezan who becomes besotted with an archi-famous musician, the Grand Ustad. Finally, the fourth and, seemingly most important, time frame concerns the filming of a docu-drama on the life of the very same courtesan, which in itself contains alternative realities. This film is being financed by a mysterious wealthy East African Asian gentleman, whose only condition is that the producer-director, none other than Sonia, casts a Bollywood actress of his choice in the starring role.

One of the most striking characters is Seema Henara, the Brat's mother, a maths school teacher, snobbishly conscious of her class position far above the Mohanji family. An interfering, hypocritical do-gooder, who is found murdered in her bed during the Asian expulsion, she is far from being a likeable character and yet through her Siddiqi criticizes the double moral standard that operated and posits an alternative to marital drudgery:

> All married men had mistresses, if not officially, then certainly on a casual basis. That's what men were like, and you just accepted it if you wanted to go on being married to them. But if you actually found the courage to boot them out, then it meant you were someone very special, someone who was not afraid of being single and someone who was not afraid of the future. For this reason, Mrs. Henara commanded a lot of respect in the local community. Other women, trapped in unhappy marriages, secretly envied her freedom. And the men admired her too, especially those who regularly cheated on their wives. For them, Mrs. Henara was an exceptionally attractive woman who, by kicking out her husband, had surely made herself available on the good mistress-candidates list. (FV 59)

The sanctity of the family is the hindance to opting for another life outside marriage. However, in her discussion on Indian women migrants in the United States Keya Ganguly reaches conclusions that have bearing on the situation of women in other parts of the Indian diaspora.

> Despite the constraints that the patriarchal family system imposes on women, it is the force and effect of racism and post-colonial de-centering that inscribe their lives and everyday resistances. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that the family remains the only 'traditional' cultural support and source of renewal for the women. (45)

The family in Vassanji's fiction may remain a solid prop for some women but for others it becomes a prison. The younger generation of women in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* react differently to the notion of family as cultural support. Deepa runs away determined to marry Njoroge, her Kikuyu childhood sweetheart. On her return she is subdued and turns into an adult woman overnight. On the other hand, Yasmin, the Muslim girl Vikram befriends during his stay in Dar es Salaam, is willing to venture out into forbidden territory as Vikram himself muses: "Ours was a relationship straining for definition. We spoke about many things together, even about how the other Indian students looked askance at us" (VL 233). He becomes the subject of communal prejudice in the Asian community of Dar es Salaam as he is a Hindu Punjabi and she a Cutchi Muslim. Vikram recognizes the

same kind of female strength that his sister possesses: “there was a part of her that evidently sought to escape beyond the restrictive bounds of her community. It did not deter her that I did not belong to her faith” (VL 211).

Yasmin admires Deepa for her “spunk” as she calls it. Vikram’s lack of determination, linked with the news that even Deepa’s defiance of parents’ and community rules could be crushed, lead her to give him up and find herself a partner from her own community. The third young woman character is Shoba, Vikram’s wife. Theirs is a real marriage of convenience. Shobha is no firecracker like Deepa as she seeks her pleasure within the confines of the family,

> I don’t think she disliked or hated me either; there was an element of condescension perhaps, or the fact that I was a mere middleman, a dalal as she called it, an agent of others. But she believed in the sanctity of the family and the home, which remained a contented one. There were outings with our children Ami and Sita, there were the large extended family gatherings on Sundays, there were the films. (VL 340)

Vassanji suggests a diaspora space that is dangerous and exciting, enticing but at the same time deeply enriching. Deepa and Njoroge find themselves in “the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*” (Brah, 1996: 209; emphasis in original) as both are confronted by a new dynamic, border-crossing. Ironically, although Deepa and, to a lesser extent, Yasmin, take on board the perils of the diaspora space, they end up returning to the fold, voluntarily or by force. Shobha, the embodiment of tradition, will ironically be the one to abandon her husband, but only when his involvement in political corruption becomes too shameful to bear. In Tejani’s novel Nanziri, the forceful African nurse that Samsher will eventually marry, understands that “a brown figure was far more acceptable among the black figures than it would ever be the other way [because] the Africans had kept their creative social life, where a man was still a man, not his colour” (DT 118).

The fact that it is the male Asian character who claims the diaspora space as his own arena where he can forge a whole new value system and bury the spectre of miscegenation for good hardly needs any further comment. The female Asian has generally remained banished to the back room of East African Asian writing, invisible and totally silenced. In this respect Vassanji has elaborated on Tejani’s one-sided view of interracial relationships and the latter´s –possibly exaggerated– faith in the Africans´ innate sense of freedom and humanism by suggesting that an Indian girl might fall in love and desire to marry an African boy.

Rather than single out essential features of the Asian communities of Kenya, it makes more sense to focus on the borders of the South Asian diaspora, on what it defines itself against. Diasporas seek to construct alternative public spheres that maintain identifications outside the national space in order to live inside but with a difference. Mr. Lall, born and bred in Africa was, “proudly Kenyan, hopelessly... colonial – went to India once, and brought back my mother” (VL 21). His practice is to accommodate with the host country, in this case complicated by the three-tier racial hierarchy in place in Kenya, and, at the same time, resist its norms. His reaction to Deepa’s claim that she has the right to choose her own husband leaves no doubt:

"What do you mean you will marry anyone whom you want? Papa exploded. We are not Europeans, remember that, we are desis, Indians. Proud Indians, we have our customs, and we marry with the permission and blessings of our parents! You will do as you are told, girl!" (VL 200-1).

It is revealing that his understanding of the host country is *Britain* not Kenya with its native black inhabitants. The Lall parents are unwilling to enter Brah's diaspora space.[14] Mrs. Lall identifies very closely with India (she was born and brought up there unlike her husband) and thus reacts as a first generation migrant rather than as a member of an established diaspora. She tells her daughter that: "There's nothing wrong with being an African or Asian or European. But they can't mix. It doesn't work" (VL 206).

Dasgupta & Das Dasgupta suggest that fear of assimilation into what they see as an alien, inferior way of life has taken a heavier toll on women than men,

> Confronted by [...] the practice of individual choice of partners [...] first-generation parents have become anxious about the preservation of their cultural way of life. This fear of cultural erasure has further led these immigrant parents to adhere more strongly to Indian traditions. Moreover, as the keepers of culture, the mothers are actually showing more conservatism than the fathers. (120)

Deepa has flouted custom, she runs away from home only to return when she discovers that Njoroge has succumbed to her mother's pleadings and has called the affair off. She marries Dilip on the rebound and although dutifully performs the role of wife and mother, cannot stop seeing her childhood love again. By openly being seen with an African in her shop she risks being ostracised by the whole community and her husband is forced to aid the murder of Njoroge to avoid shame and scandal being attached to the family name. Blame for Dilip's accidental death in a motoring accident is attached to her and she is even spat upon in public by a fellow Asian. The diasporic community rules its women with a rod of iron,

> The burden of being 'Indian' seems to be on the women in the Community more than on the men. [...] Since the community strongly believes that its very integrity as a group depends on the loyalty of the second generation to certain old world values, it spares no effort to draw the latter into the vortex of tradition. The behaviour of [...] women is closely monitored. Trangressions from ideal notions of femininity, heterosexual chastity and faithfulness to 'the community' face disapproval. (Rayaprol 183-189).

The double standards of "the community" are ridiculed in Jameela Siddiqi`s post-feminist works, which overturn patriarchal norms completely. She does not simply turn the tables and empower her women characters in order to disempower the men. Nobody escapes her ironic vision of the narrow-minded and regrettably short-sighted view South Asians cherished of Africa and Africans. In Peter Nazareth's words, she

[14] However, at the end of the novel, after the death of his mother, Vikram's father will seek comfort in the arms of an African woman.

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"frees the feminine to orchestrate a new recital" (Nazareth, 2002: 76) but this new recital draws attention to the pettiness and bigotry of the East African Asians of either gender. The fact that her character the Brat turns out to be a boy dressed up as a girl by his mother in order to keep custody of the child suggest her more fluid understanding of gender as performance rather than a biological given: "I don´t care if they say I´m a boy. Fine, I´ll be a boy on the outside if it pleases them, but inside I still feel like a little girl" (FV 331). The deconstruction of gender relations in Siddiqi's work points to a new understanding of the dynamics of the South Asian diaspora in East Africa, as complex and multifaceted as any community anywhere in the world.

5. CONCLUSION: IN SEARCH OF AFRICANNESS

Salim Juma names the gunny sack bequeathed to him by Ji Bai "Shehrbanoo" as every momento he retrieves from its interior triggers off a new story. Each object recalls a forgotten link in the history of the descendants of Dhanji Govindji. One of the tantalisingly missing links is the story of Govindji's African mistress and great-grandmother of Salim. Her life story has been suppressed from the narrative as an embarrassing secret best left untold. Salim muses,

> What was she like, this gentle one, this Bibi Taratibu, given to my ancestor for comfort on lonely, breezy African nights when mango and coconut trees rustled and crickets chirped and the roaring ocean echoed with reminders of a distant homeland? From what ravaged tribe, gutted village, was she brought to the coast, and did she not also think of her home, her slaughtered father and uncles, her brothers and sisters also taken away [...]. (GS 29).

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Taratibu, "patience" in Swahili, is the clue to understanding and coming to terms with the African heritage. Certainly, Dhanji Govindji "risked damnation for her son" (GS 184). Interestingly, Salim is both fascinated and repelled by the sensuality of African women, which harks back to Said´s *Orientalism* (1978). In a similar fashion, he fears the native quarter of Dar es Salaam, where the family move from a Nairobi rapidly turning into a hell, seething with rumours of the horrors of the Mau Mau amid the paradise that the Asians had created. Indeed the African quarter goes "right into the bush" (GS 35). Salim's great-grandfather embarks on a physical journey in search for his African roots in the form of his mixed-race son Huseni, who, perhaps lured by his own African identity, disappears one day into the heart of Africa. Vassanji makes Govindji's quest come to nought as he spends all his life savings together with his community's resources. He is, at the time, the Mukhi [headman] of Matamu so this act of embezzlement will in fact lead to his own murder.

Interracial relationships in Vassanji's novels tend to be problematic, not because of the clash of values between the couple but inevitably for the external pressures put upon them, in other words, the power of *khandaanity*. Thus Bibi Taratibu is hastily dispached to make way for a "proper" Indian wife and her part in the family saga is swept under the carpet, as Kulsum warns Salim: "Black ancestry was

not something you advertised. Kulsum had two girls' marriage prospects to think of. A whiff of African blood from the family tree would be like an Arctic blast, it would bring the mercury of social standing down to unacceptable levels" (GS 184).

In his discussion of the works of Peter Nazareth, John Scheckter suggests that the Asians must find their security in linkage, not lineage, and their legitimacy in cooperation, not filiation (Scheckter 92). Their Africanness can only be grasped through association rather than intermarrying with Africans until the painful historical burden of exploitation that has kept the groups apart slowly merges into a new understanding of Africanness.

> "Why do you call me 'Indian'"? I too am an African. I was born here. My father was born here – even my grandfather!"
> "And then? Beyond that? What did they come to do, these ancestors of yours? Can you tell me? Perhaps you don't know. Perhaps you conveniently forgot – they financed the slave trade!"
> 'Not all of them' –
> "Enough of them!"
> [...] And what of your Swahili ancestors, Amina? If mine financed the slave trade, yours ran it. It was your people who took guns and whips and burnt villages in the interior, who brought back boys and girls in chains to Bagamoyo. Not all, you too will say [...]. (GS 258-9)

In an exhibition held in Nairobi in 2004 to celebrate the often underestimated Indian contribution to African politics, the chairman of the Asian African Heritage Trust, Pheroze Nowrojee claimed a space for South Asianness within the hybridized society of East Africa. He argued, "Our social identity rests on our bi-continental tradition. We are both Asian and African. We are Asian Africans" (Tharoor 2004).

Generally speaking, as the mistrust of the Asians has been dissipated and their role in boosting the post-colonial economies of East African nations is finally being acknowledged, there has been a sea change in attitude among the Asians themselves. The Nairobi exhibition is an example of how citizens of countries such as Kenya or Uganda with ancestral roots in the Indian subcontinent are claiming their identity as "Asian Africans" and celebrating their hybrid selves in the diaspora space together with fellow citizens of black African origin. The possibility of a true hybrid society may not be feasible in East Africa or anywhere in the world as despite the current climate of globalization people tend to hang on to their differences with a vengeance. The image of the Asians as "sticking together" and, by extension, refusing to enter fully into Brah's diaspora space, is persistently mocked by Siddiqi, who laments the cultural isolation of the diaspora from its homeland.

> If only those blinkered Indian nationalist leaders and their descendants had taken the trouble to come and study the mechanics of multi-religious harmony in Pearl, then they would have found a perfect model of their cherished dreams. And they would have also learnt the vital lesson that this kind of give-and-take among the settlers from India, was only possible out of a sense of having a common enemy –the Black Man. (FV 83)

This passage indicates that the African has been upgraded from a feminized docile, complacent, willing receptacle – the black womb – to a sexually aggressive, ruthless, despotic menace – the Black Man, and even nowadays marriages between Asian women and African men are still the exception that proves the rule.[15]

Siddiqi´s parodic treatment of the Indian settlers in East Africa provokes more laughter than epistomological satisfaction. Her choice of a Rushdiesque repertoire of grotesque stereotypes –Naranbhai in *Bombay Gardens* and Mr. Mohanji in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* embody the bigoted dukawallah to perfection– instead of more in-depth character portrayals excludes a more meaningful narrative of the constraints and pressures surrounding the female diasporic experience. The twists and turns in both her plots and the ruthless unearthing of Asian quirks pave the way towards a new understanding of the closed society, the African *chota bharat*. Despite the welcome female slant in Vassanji´s and Siddiqi´s work and the valuable contribution to East African Asian cultural history of Alibhai-Brown's and Kapur-Dromson's memoirs, the novel on the female East African Asian, which explores both her subaltern state as a woman and her privileged social ranking as an Asian, is yet to be written.

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[15] Journalist Rasna Warah, author of *Triple Heritage* (1998), is married to a black Kenyan but claims that "The worst thing that might happen to us as a group is that we just dwindle and fade away." http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/1243587.stm

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