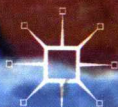
The background of the cover features a hand holding a flaming torch. The torch has a dark, fluted handle and a bright, multi-colored flame (red, orange, yellow) that appears to be burning against a dark blue sky. In the lower portion of the image, a range of mountains with white snow or ice is visible, set against a lighter blue sky with some clouds. The overall composition is vertical and centered.

**Reading  
Migration  
and Culture**

**The World of  
East African  
Indian  
Literature**

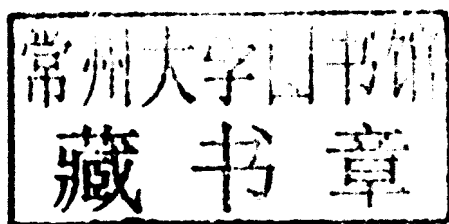
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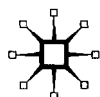
# Reading Migration and Culture

The World of East African Indian Literature

Dan Ojwang



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## Reading Migration and Culture

*To my parents, Walter and Rhoda Ojwang, and to my daughter  
Naledi Akinyi*

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I have received assistance from many, but responsibility for any shortcomings in this book ultimately lies with me.

# Note on Usage

I use the names “Asian” and “Indian” interchangeably throughout this book to refer to East Africans of sub-continental Indian (South Asian) heritage. The term “Indian” was widely used before the Partition of India in 1947, but later given up by many in East Africa in favor of “Asian.” However, “Asian” is not entirely accurate for it excludes Arabs, Chinese, Japanese and other Asians. “Indian” too is not entirely appropriate if used to refer to migrants whose ancestral homes are in the modern nation-states of Pakistan and Bangladesh. I occasionally use the appellations “Asian African,” “Afrindian” and “Asian East African,” which have gained traction in recent times, especially in North America.

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# Introduction

The roots of this book reach back to the mid-1990s when, as a postgraduate student, I first encountered the fiction of M. G. Vassanji. Growing up in Kenya, I had read several texts that dealt with the presence of East Africans of South Asian origin, but none of them was by a member of any of the South Asian communities in the region. The figure of the “Indian” was common enough, appearing in popular jokes, formal historical accounts about the emergence of Kenya and Uganda as nation-states, in histories of pre-colonial Indian Ocean trade routes, in stories about the Ugandan-Asian expulsions of 1972, in my uncles’ accounts of black labor in colonial-era towns and plantations, in popular music, in novels by black East African authors, and in media discussions of “the racial issue.” In the many contexts in which it appeared, the generic figure of the “Indian” was usually, though not exclusively, an object of popular hopes, fears and resentments engendered by the rapid changes brought about by colonial “civilization.” It served as a lightning rod for anxieties about a new type of social life, one that was increasingly mediated by money and commodities.

These anxieties were well captured in *Otieno Achach* (Otieno the Deviant/Wayward), the first novel in the Luo language, authored by Christian Konjra Alloo (from Tanzania) and published in 1966. In this story, which I first read as a schoolboy, the picaresque anti-hero, Otieno, wanders about the countryside next to Lake Victoria in north-western Tanganyika, the old colonial name for part of what would later become independent Tanzania. Spoilt by his peasant parents because he is an only child, and dogged by ill luck, Otieno commits many crimes in his short life. In the melodramatic ending to the novel, he is buried alive after becoming trapped, mysteriously, in a grave that has been dug for one of his victims. In an early episode in the novel, Otieno’s wanderlust leads him to the home of a kindly “Ja-Hindi” (Luo for “Indian”) merchant in the small trading settlement at Kinesi on the shores of Lake Victoria. Here, he finds employment as a domestic servant, a washerman. Working as a laundry-man runs against a masculine code of honor to which he vaguely subscribes, but is willing to compromise because

he is to be paid a monthly sum of twenty-five shillings. Due to his humility, he is promoted to work as a shop assistant, an easier role more in line with his wishes. One day, he learns that the "Ja-Hindi" is temporarily closing shop and going away on a day's visit. Otieno is excited because this is his chance to take a break from the monotony of his work in the shop to go fishing in the lake nearby. However, his desire for adventure is soon dashed when "the woman owner of the house," the wife of the "Ja-Hindi," gives him an unusually large pile of clothes to wash. He is disappointed at this turn of events, but decides to humble himself once again. His discovery that the pile includes an item soiled by an infant, however, takes him back to a past of criminality he thought he had left behind. The son of the merchant, younger than Otieno, noticing the look of disgust on the latter's face, tells him: "*Boi, kaw lewnigo mondo ichak luoko piyo piyo*" ("Boy, take those clothes and start washing them fast!")<sup>1</sup> In anger, Otieno slaps the boy, who rushes into the house and comes out with a hammer, ready to strike back. Otieno wrestles the hammer away from the boy and bludgeons him with it, leaving him for dead. Otieno's last act before he leaves the household is to take as many valuable objects as he can: blankets, bed sheets, clothes, spoons and knives. He returns to his home to resume his old role as a herdsboy, but soon sets out on yet another quest for employment with an Indian merchant when his loot is stolen.

Otieno's story mirrors that in two other early East African novels, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and Okot p'Bitek's *Lak Tar Miyo Kinyero Wi Lobo* (1953) the first novel in the Acholi language, whose title translates roughly as "If your teeth are white, laugh!" In *Weep Not, Child*, the sad story of Njoroge, a naïve victim of British colonial terror during the Mau Mau uprising, is compounded by his employment in an Indian shop, the last act of humiliation before his attempted suicide. In the English translation of *Lak Tar*, titled *White Teeth* (1989), the narrator-protagonist Okeca Ladwong, whose praise name is Atuk, makes satirical comments about an Indian shopkeeper, "the back of whose head had folds like the bottom of an elephant." The context of his bitterness is his pursuit of bridewealth, which takes him to an Indian-owned sugar plantation in southern Uganda, where he takes up employment. At the end of his contract he has not met his target, due to wily shopkeepers who keep him in debt and an inhumane employer who denies him his dues:

This Indian fellow must be joking! Me, to work as a common labourer again for six months, using a hoe and wearing sisal sacks... Atuk to experience once again the roughness of sugarcane blades! Those razor-sharp blades again! Mother at home was nursing a wild and false dream that her son was saving money for marriage and yet here was an Indian slashing off one hundred shillings just like that! And he was standing

there arrogantly hands in pockets, telling me I was to work as a labourer for six months!<sup>2</sup>

The protagonists of *Otieno Achach*, *Weep Not, Child* and *Lak Tar* all express, in varying degrees, an inchoate consciousness of colonial class differentiation. Their encounter with the workings of colonial power as it delineates race, ethnicity and class in stark forms, provides a rude awakening, for they have been born in cultures that less than a half-century before, operated on very different logic. The engineering of class through race, and of race through class, awakens them to the reality that the colonial world provides very little room for social mobility on the part of Africans, and it comes at a near-impossible price.

In introducing this book, I have returned to black literary evocations of the East African colonial scene because they illuminate a point made by the West Indian scholar Walter Rodney about the mutual mediation of black African and Indian colonial subjects through colonial systems of knowledge:

When an African abuses an Indian he repeats all that the white men said about Indian indentured “coolies”; and in turn the Indian has borrowed from the whites the stereotype of the “lazy nigger” to apply to the African beside him. It is as though no black man can see another black man except by looking through a white person. It is time we started seeing through our own eyes.<sup>3</sup>

I do not read Rodney simply to mean that black and Indian Africans repeated British colonial stereotypes about one another. What I am alluding to is the way in which the very ordering of colonial society made stereotyping almost inevitable. Placed and constrained in specific economic roles, between which there was little room for mobility, blacks and Indians came to occupy mutually hostile subject positions, the bridging of which required leaps of the imagination. In a discussion of Uganda’s political economy, Mahmood Mamdani has noted how the British colonial state encouraged the entry of thousands of migrants into the territory from colonial India. Legally proscribed from owning land in the early years of colonialism, the migrants’ only viable option for survival was trading, to which they were actively channeled. The Indo-Portuguese Goans were the exception in this regard for they came to occupy the professions as clerks, teachers, doctors, lawyers and priests. Mamdani accounts for the colonial policy of encouraging Indian commerce in two ways. First, Indian merchants had excelled in trade and financing in pre-colonial Zanzibar and its coastal, vassal city-states, which were then under the rule of an Omani-Arab monarchy. Years before the formal colonization, these merchants had established trading networks in interior territories that were later to become part of Kenya, Uganda and

Tanganyika. This prepared them for the role of compradors, middle-men between colonial capital and Africans. The second reason, more insidious than the first, was as follows:

If the main trading group came from outside the region—from another colony—it would have little historical contact with the colonized masses. The colonized trader learns his nationalism in the market place, his anti-colonialism is a demand for control over the national market. But a non-national trading class which was isolated from the people would fall back on the colonial state for support; it would be politically neutralized. And so it was.<sup>4</sup>

Mamdani's argument is useful for its recognition that East African nationalisms were produced by the very colonial machinery that had driven black people into inchoate racial and class subjectivity. However, disciplined within the strictures of Marxist political economy prevalent in the time of its publication, Mamdani's book gives short shrift to the ways in which the colonial ordering of society played with the imaginaries of Indian and black East Africans. It is this gap in political economy and professional historical discourse—the ways in which economic, political and social realities are apprehended through and refracted in the imagination—that is filled by literary accounts of Indian-African encounters. Reading *Otieno Achach* and *Lak Tar* reveals how such encounters were apprehended through tropes of gender (a silent category, with few exceptions, in historical and political economy accounts of East Africa prior to the 1990s). Black male characters, in these early African language texts, came to understand their position in colonial labor and commercial relations, not through a self-conscious discourse of class, but through tropes of masculine loss. These literary accounts, in their turn, subsume female perspectives on the colonial experience, but in doing so reveal a rich field for scholarly reflection: the ordering of race, gender, sexuality and the "domestic" realm in the (post)colonial scene and how a focus on this might direct studies of Asian East African diasporas in productive new directions.<sup>5</sup>

This book puts a special focus on the domestic realm because it is one of the most fraught themes in narratives of the "contact zones" between Indian and black East Africans.<sup>6</sup> Numerous commentators have remarked upon what they regard to be the exclusive character of Asian African communities, a reputation that owes in part to an ability to retain a sense of cultural continuity in a context of migration. For instance, Sophia Mustafa (the Tanzanian writer and political activist of South Asian origin who, alongside Julius Nyerere and others, shaped anti-colonial nationalism in the country) ruefully noted soon after political independence that "Asians are basically parochial, communal and clannish, and as far as those who originate from the sub-continent of India and Pakistan are concerned, are happy to live

within their own clans, peoples or religious denominations.”<sup>7</sup> As I show throughout this book, this ability to form what Mariam Pirbhai calls “tight-knit ethnic and religious enclaves with strong social structures, endogamous relations, and cultural traditions that help preserve a deeply rooted sense of community” takes form through the management of domesticity in its spatial and imaginary, symbolic forms.<sup>8</sup> This book begins from the premise that although this theme has been gestured at in existing studies on East African Asian writing, it has not been broached with the singular and sustained attention that it deserves.

To illuminate the notion of a “domestic” realm, I rely on Rosemary Marangoly George’s *The Politics of Home*, one of whose key concerns is how immigrant figures in global literatures in English forge senses of home in conditions of displacement through filial and communal solidarity. If the idea of “home” suggests, at first, a sense of “patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection,” George shows how this image masks the elaborate patterns of inclusion and exclusion that go into the making of homes.<sup>9</sup> Whether as a geographical site, a mobile habitus or a mental landscape, “home” is crafted on the basis of inclusions that are “grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of a kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout this book, I use “home” to refer to an array of related ideas: as a dwelling-house, a site for family making, a geographical site of origin, a native land and an imagined place of national, ethnic, religious and personal belonging. Virtually all the writers considered in this book attempt to come to terms with the charged meanings invested in British colonial, “native” African and migrant Asian constructions of home in the East African context. They show how colonial practices of racial differentiation and segregation produced senses of self-identity and community, which were in turn reworked through pre-existing notions of belonging on the part of Asian and black East Africans alike.

In exploring themes of self-identity, community and belonging, this book focuses on the sizeable body of literary works by East African Asian writers published from the 1960s onwards.<sup>11</sup> If the picture presented in these writings is anything to go by, the general experience of the diaspora has been one of growing up with a sense of alienation in the region, a feeling which, in turn, has taken form in elaborate constructions of “culture” to provide a protective shield against displacement. The feeling of alienation, more than anything else, has provided inspiration for what is, today, a significant group of writers who take the burdens and pleasures of migration as their central subject. Many of these writers only begin to attract serious attention in the 1990s—owing in part to the success of M. G. Vassanji, whose first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, was published in 1989. My initial encounter with this text, and I would imagine for other East African readers too, was eye-opening, for I was for the first time encountering the story of East African

Asians not from the perspective of black grievance and colonial stereotype, but from that of an “insider.” Being an “insider” is not risk-free but provides nuances of East African Asian experiences that disappear under the “bold type” of colonial and nationalist discourse. Although Vassanji has almost become synonymous with East African Asian writing as a whole, he is preceded on the scene by a large group of writers whose contribution to both African literature and the writing of the global South Asian diaspora has been underestimated. The post-independence traditions of Asian writing in the East African region can be traced to *Penpoint*, the literary student magazine of Makerere University in which the talents of East African writers of English expression such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Jonathan Kariara, John Nagenda, Pio Zirimu and David Rubadiri were incubated in the early 1960s. Alongside this group were young contributors of South Asian ancestry such as Peter Nazareth, Bahadur Tejani, Tilak Banerjee, Sadru Somji, Adolf Mascarenhas, Yusuf Kassam, Sadru Kassam and Mohamed Virjee. Of the latter group, only Tejani and Nazareth have attained prominence in literary circles, which may be due to their vocation as literary critics. Indeed, both of them are as well-known for their works of literary criticism as they are for poetry, drama and prose fiction. In addition to the Makerere group of Asian writers were others such as Rajat Neogy, the founding editor of *Transition*, the famous African literary magazine, who was also a poet and an essayist of note; medical doctor and novelist, Yusuf Dawood; lawyer and poet, Pheroze Nowrojee; the playwright and hotelier, Kuldip Sondhi; teacher and playwright, Ganesh Bagchi; poet and playwright, Jagjit Singh; and Hubert Ribeiro (de Santana), the Kenyan-Goan poet. Autobiographies and communal histories have been produced by John Maximian Nazareth, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Rasna Warah, Mahmood Mamdani, Sofia Mustafa, M. G. Visram and Pally Dhillon, among others.

The first novel by an East African of South Asian heritage, Bahadur Tejani’s *Day After Tomorrow* (1971), set the stage for the coverage of the theme of migrant Asian constructions of home, a theme taken up by later authors such as Vassanji and Jameela Siddiqi. In *Day After Tomorrow*, Tejani depicts Asian dwellings in East Africa as barricades against the Other, and tries to imagine solidarities across the boundaries of race, ethnicity and religion. In his attempt to enact an imaginative bridging of the chasms of race, Tejani writes inter-racial romance as an allegory for a desired polity, one in which earlier concerns with racial reproduction have been abandoned. This theme is replicated in, among many others, Jameela Siddiqi’s satirical depiction in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* (2001) of the Small Town Indian Morality Committee, one of whose key aims is the prevention of Afro-Asian marriages. Figures of inter-racial conjugality reappear in Vassanji’s fiction, but the romances invariably end up in failure, which could be read as the author’s recognition of the difficulty of resolving complex historical problems on a literary terrain. Discourses of gender, sexuality, race, religion, caste, domesticity and

class, linked as they are with the desire for cultural reproduction by migrant communities, are key themes in the writings discussed in this book.

One of the key risks in undertaking a study such as this one, which focuses on much-favored themes of post-colonial criticism, would be to flatten the nuances of the body of writing by imposing upon it the pervasive ideas about migrancy, diaspora and marginality on what would thus be constituted as a pliable body of texts whose sole function would be to provide evidence for *a priori* theories. In a repetition of older forms of cultural subjugation, these texts would be used simply as blank slates upon which the desires of the critic would be written rather than as entities that emit signs regarding how they should be read. As Vijay Mishra has warned in his groundbreaking book on the literatures of the global Indian diaspora, there is “an uneasy postmodern trend towards collapsing diasporic (and historical) differences,” one in which local histories are obscured in order to secure a singular, universal meaning to diasporic experience.<sup>12</sup> If I take a cautious approach to the established categories through which East African Asian writing might be read, it is because the key terms in this book—memory, otherness, exile, hybridization, nationalism, ethnicity and identity—lend themselves too easily to the kinds of appropriation Mishra warns about. How might we, while paying attention to these terms—which are indeed the ones that the writers in question privilege in their works—arrive at readings that would take seriously the local meanings of these terms, and their specific history in East Africa? Beyond the commonplace assumptions of contemporary literary theory, how can we conduct readings that take seriously the historical meanings of the strategies that the writers have deployed in addressing the presence of people of sub-continental Indian heritage in East Africa? What is the price paid in the construction of diaspora communities, and how do the writers in question deal with the burdens of heritage? How do these works write empire and nation, and what are the particular historical motives behind such representation? How are the relations between the “Asians” and the “Africans” depicted in these works and what kinds of ideologies underpin these representations? Against what kinds of discourses are these works written, and what does this tell us about the relations of power in the historical contexts that are evoked? From what “libraries” of representation are the tropes deployed in this literature derived, and what does this tell us about the intellectual history and the imaginative affiliations of the writing?

The starting point of this book is that East African writing has generally been carried out in a context of dislocation and racial discourse as a consequence of the particular trajectories of colonial, capitalist modernity in the region. However, the pivotal role of displacement in the formation of the region’s literary culture does not mean that there has been a uniform attitude to the meanings of migration and the accompanying anxieties about cultural belonging. The book therefore reflects on the concept “migrancy” and cognate terms such as “exile” and “diaspora” and their place in East African

debates. I argue that in the older tradition of anti-colonialism, displacement was privileged as a starting point for discussions of modernity, but that its treatment was mostly a preparation for the restoration of those cultures and histories that had been repressed or denied in the process of modernization. It is within this older tradition that I locate East African Asian writers of the immediate post-independence period (1960 and 70s), such as Peter Nazareth and Bahadur Tejani. In the case of more recent writers who write in the context of globalization, postmodernism and post-colonialism—represented here by M. G. Vassanji—displacement is privileged as a figure for cultural change, and the quest for national belonging is treated with a degree of doubt. I examine both of these positions in relation to what they conceal, and also the insights they offer in relation to debates about home and homeliness.

In the course of diasporic attempts to build cultural communities as a defense against dislocation, considerable pressure has often been brought to bear on the relations between men and women as the basis for such constructions of community. In virtually all of the works under study, gender and sexuality are frequently presented as key figures in patriarchal claims about cultural identity and in the representation of the Other. I examine the political logic of such uses of gender and sexuality, and the varying ways in which the writers in question give treatment to such politics. I pay special attention to the debates about “hybridity” and “cultural synthesis,” the extent to which they are linked to sexuality, and the ways in which the writers deploy these terms in their utopian hope for African-Asian relations in East Africa. As I hope to show, the faith many of the writers invest in hybridization depends on a problematic conflation of the terms “race” and “culture,” and the ascribing of troubled relations between Africans and the Indian diaspora to differences in “culture.” If notions of hybridization and ideal domesticity presuppose heterosexual diasporic subjects, I show how a younger generation of writers, represented by Shailja Patel and Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla, write queer sexuality to displace the claims of diasporic cultural nationalism.

In reading the representation of anti-colonial and nationalist politics, the book shows the extent to which the writers understand social conflict as a function of cultural difference, hence their privileging of cultural tolerance as a way out of social tensions. In keeping with this logic, some of the writers suggest that irony, and the coexistence of polarities, is the marker of an enabling politics. Although I acknowledge the usefulness of irony, both as a mode of narration and as a political attitude, especially in contexts of transition such as those depicted in the literature, I show the pitfalls of the politics of irony. In order to make this argument, I compare the sense of doubt that informs much of Vassanji’s work, influenced as it is by relatively new postcolonial debates on multiculturalism and diaspora, and the older tradition of a literary “commitment.” I argue that this older tradition is



marked by a sense of cosmopolitanism that newer “post-colonialist” readings routinely ignore in attempts to lay the foundations for a new canon. As should be clear from the above, no proper understanding of East African Indian writing could be possible without an engagement with the idea of the past and its irruption in the present, for outlining the context of literary production inevitably means a dense interrogation of history. The book therefore examines Vassanji’s self-conscious ruminations about the past and its recovery in memory. In an important sense, Vassanji’s treatment of the idea of history is itself a marker of the various intellectual landscapes that he occupies. As a member of a minority diasporic community, he privileges history as a defense against cultural oblivion, even if memory of the role of the community in the colonial project is the cause of much reflection in his work; as a writer whose affiliations are modernist, he desires an escape from the nightmare of history; and, as a postmodernist of sorts, he depicts history as a field of “play” among different voices and versions.

As I argue throughout the book, it would be impossible to make sense of the approaches of the different authors to their craft without some understanding of their intellectual contexts, the broader history of the South Asian presence in East Africa, and indeed, the subsequent migrations to Europe and North America. In order to contextualize the writing and its cultural politics, I provide a brief sketch of the South Asian history of contact and exchange with East Africa, which shows the tenuous basis of the exclusive senses of belonging that came to be forged in European colonial discourse, Asian migrant cultures of the colonial period and, later, African nationalism.

Historical studies on travel, trade and cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean suggest that contact between the Indian sub-continent and eastern Africa goes back more than two millennia.<sup>13</sup> The earliest written account of this contact, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*—scripted around CE 80 by a Greek pilot of Berenice, a port on the Red Sea—provides an account of Arab and Indian ships trading with the East African coast.<sup>14</sup> Writing in the thirteenth century, the Venetian traveler Marco Polo remarked upon the Indian ships visiting the islands of “Madeigascar” and “Zanghibar.”<sup>15</sup> Although the date of the first Indian settlement in East Africa is not certain, a Chinese geographical text from the thirteenth century mentions a Gujarati settlement in the area.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the fifteenth Century, such settlements were so well-established that the Portuguese sailor-explorer, Vasco da Gama, was piloted across the Indian Ocean, from Malindi on the coast of present-day Kenya to Calicut on the Indian Malabar coast, by a Gujarati navigator.<sup>17</sup> Even at this stage, a mini world-system was already in existence, an “Indian Ocean World” that encompassed the East African coastal cities, the Middle East, South Asia, the Far East, and the oceanic islands of Madagascar, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean arena at the end of the fifteenth century significantly reduced the volumes of trade that had passed