EAST AFRICAN INDIAN WRITING AND THE WORLDING OF DIASPORAS

Peter Simatei
Moi University
E-mail: tpsimatei@mu.ac.ke

Abstract

This paper proceeds from the understanding that artworks can constitute worlds that are different from present realities. In this process of world-making, art and literature, in general, constitute fictional spaces that either contest the existing ones or are relational to them. What this means, then, is that the process of "worlding" can equally be understood as that of undoing hegemonic formations and spaces. This article explores how diasporic writings produce political and cultural realities—imagined and utopic—that contest and transform relations based on national rootedness and territorial logic. I will use the term "world-making" to mean the artworks' ability to contest and transform existing relations of power—whether or not these relations are subsumed under such categories as gender, religion, ethnicity, nation, class, or race—to call alternative temporalities into being. In this sense, I take diaspora-making as a constitutive process that seeks to challenge certain dominant premises, including capitalist globalization, that structure being in the world or being of the world.

Keywords: Worlding, Diasporas, Nation, Identity, Displacement

Worlding Diasporas

Due to different forms of diasporic experiences and histories, a conclusive definition of the term "diaspora" is perhaps neither possible nor even necessary. However, as Brubaker (2001, p. 6–7) explains, many diasporic formations would still share certain core elements, such as dispersal, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance, that are constitutive of diasporas. Here I use the term "diaspora" to refer to the contemporary migrations and subsequent transnational social formations and identities of third- and fourth-generation East African Indians,[1] now dispersed across four continents, namely Africa, North America, Europe, and India. These two generations are themselves heir to the old Indian diaspora of East Africa, which arose in the late nineteenth century with the movement of indentured laborers to the region. Of course, the Indian presence on the East African coast predates colonialism. Early Indian settlers in East Africa included merchants with large-scale business ventures across the littoral realms of the Indian Ocean. In their fictional works, this new diaspora affirms the multiple histories to which they are heir. The transnational nature of their present realities becomes fictionalized in their texts, an engagement that maps diasporic politics as a critical feature of their writing.

Also amplified in their writings are the pet concerns of diaspora discourses, i.e. the politics of home and belonging in displacement, the ambivalence of the postcolonial situation, the polyvalent nature of cultural identities and histories within the postcolony, and the coexistence of a multiplicity of cultural cartographies associated with it.

For the Indian diaspora in East Africa, the reworlding of the world involves not only the translation of a national space that is recast by nationalist narratives as "stable, culturally homogeneous, historically unchanging; it also means writing a de-territorialized diaspora, one that does not return, unbounded category of people not connected with a specific homeland. What is imagined here are individual identities that are malleable hybrid and multiple" (Mavroudi, 2007). In other words, this literature counters two kinds of essentialisms: one is constructed within the nation-state and colonial state (where the national people and territory are understood in homogeneous and exclusionary terms); the other essentialism comes with concepts of diaspora that reify notions of belonging and the "roots" of migrants in places of origin (Sökefeld, 2006, p. 265).

Acts of reworlding in East African Indian writings involve the opening up of worlds that (nationalist) narratives tend to close off. But this is also a contradictory process in the sense that, instead of aligning with forces that seek to destroy the colonial world, the Indian community seeks refuge in a rapidly disintegrating empire. In the novels of M. G. Vassanji, for example, the Asian community reacts to African nationalism as a threat to the Asian spaces of privilege guaranteed under colonialism. Asian nostalgia for the "order" and territorial open-endedness once ordained and sustained by the British Empire turns the quest for empowerment in a postcolonial world into a desire for British subjecthood. At this point, the critique of nationalism, voiced through the ordinary Asian's fear of the uncertainties of African independence, is not founded on an epistemological skepticism toward the emancipatory potential of nationalism; it is rather shaped by the lures of a more hegemonic form of nationalism, i.e., British imperialism. But as it is demonstrated in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, most Indians—and this is also a fact of history—were part of the decolonization efforts, especially in Kenya.

It is the remapping of East Africa by nationalist ideologies that opens up possibilities of alternative worlds for the East African Indian diaspora. In the colonial setup, the Indians had occupied an ambivalent position of relative privilege. When this order dissolved amid the collapse of colonial authority—itself long projected as absolute and inviolable—it created a panic that led to the first wave of departures from East Africa. In Vassanji's two earliest novels, *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack*, the elderly characters illustrate the success of the colonial interpolation of East African Asians as subjects of the empire. Made to believe in the colonizer's superiority and the powerlessness of the colonized, they cannot fathom the inversion of authority in the colony. To the ordinary Asian, often represented by the shopkeeper, "the British government, the Queen at its head was absolute ruler, how could the mighty British give way to the African, the servant?" (Vassanji, 1996, p. 264). When Uncle Goa, a character in *The Gunny Sack*, decides to leave Dar es Salaam, he justifies his departure

thus: "The world has changed so rapidly for us … we have decided to go … we cannot watch our servants turning around and throwing insults on us" (Vassanji, 1996, p. 64).

African independence shocks because it reworlds an immutable colonial order, and while this may present possibilities of release from colonial nightmare for the erstwhile African servant (even though, as a whole, independence turns into a neocolonial nightmare), it signals to the pioneer Indian migrants a dissolution of their privileged world: a world that is not only precariously embedded in the colonial one—and therefore falls with it—but is also poised against the African. But Vassanji allows for this initial Indian reactionary attitude to African independence so as to fictionalize the Indian diaspora in East Africa as developing from a regressive diasporic formation, organized around essentialist myths of racial purity, to a dynamic one, premised on a shifting and discontinuous sense of history. While the pioneer Indian migrants are unable to cope with the changes brought about by independence, the new generation of Asians, born in Africa, are beginning to understand themselves as subjects of multiple histories, locations, and cultures.

It is through this generation that a future diaspora—which accepts "contaminated" and "impure" relationships as its defining characteristic—is visualized, and in later novels like *No New Land* and *Amriika*, Vassanji shows the new diaspora as a fulfillment of this. The burden of the hybrid subject—for instance, Salim Juma in *The Gunny Sack*, or Sonia in Siddiqi's *The Feast of Nine Virgins*—is no longer the desire to root oneself in a stable past, history, or home; it is how one can negotiate the multiple attachments one is heir to. Home, for this generation, is "not merely a place of origin but also a dis-placement of movement [where] consciousness is hence predicated on a paradoxical process of home-haunting and home-hunting, in which diasporans may experience a radical discontinuity but, at the same time, they develop a desire for cultural reconnection" (Zhang, 2004). In his novels, Vassanji shows, for example, the paradox and even the hopelessness of any attempts by East African Asians to reenact Indian identities untouched by African influences and histories. Hybrid identities that were initially scoffed at as impure and contaminated are envisaged as the defining and celebrated characteristics of an inevitable diasporic community. Salim Juma's other name, Huseni, inscribes the unstable site where migrant history is enacted. He reflects on his fluid identity thus:

> "Grandfather's name first," said the application form, and Uncle Goa asked me.
>
> "Huseni," I said, naming my renegade half-caste ancestor, and became Huseni Salim Juma for ever after.
>
> The rest of my family ignored the whole question and became Dhanji, even the more classic Dhanjee, a name invoking wealth and respect, while I, under the auspices of Uncle Goa and Mrs. Schwering's glaring eye, became: anybody. No trace of tribe, caste, colour, even continent of origin. (Vassanji, 1989, p. 108)

The pain of being nobody, of having no stable roots, becomes less of a problem when, as is shown in *No New Land,* the characters move into the equally hybridized metropolitan cities of the West. In fact, rootedness becomes a burden, and the Asian migrants from Tanzania in Toronto, for instance, prefer the tag "East African" rather than "Asian." Their unique Dar es Salaam identity is replayed as a positive marker of difference from the other Asians, all in an attempt to escape racist attacks directed at Asians, who are now collectively called "Paki(stani)."

> "Aré, man, we are not Sikhs, you know." This from the clown who is always present at such meetings. "The blacks kicked us out, now the whites will do the same.… Where do we go from here?"
>
> "Looks like Pakistan for us."
>
> "There are worse goons there. Did you hear of the two murders – "
>
> A woman cut in impatiently. "Why doesn't someone tell these Canadians we are not Pakis. I have never been to Pakistan, have you been to Pakistan? Tell them we are East Africans!" (Vassanji, 1991, p. 103–104)

As Sheng-Mei Ma has noted in the representation of immigrant subjectivities in Asian American literatures, the immigrant's "wistfulness for home converges with the exoticization of the West, where the urge to stay virginal and nativist coalesces with the drive to experience, culturally and sexually" (Ma, p. 109). However, unlike in the case of the Asian American literature Ma discusses, East African Asian texts do not articulate the longing for home by the immigrant as nostalgia for a romanticized homeland, because the idea of "home" for the East African Asian diasporic subjects is problematized by their multiple travels and relocations over time. For this category of diaspora, home is no longer associated with a particular territory, say East Africa or India, where one must stage a physical homecoming to connect with it: home is "a space inside (the) mind" (Siddiqi, 2001, p. 1); it is memory whose selective reenactments by the diasporic subjects enable them to partake of multiple identities, locations, and affiliations, as we see in the cases of Sonia in *The Feast of Nine Virgins*, Salim in *The Gunny Sack*, and the immigrant community in *No New Land*.

These texts affirm the multiple hybrid and fluid identities in diasporic experiences as the subjectivities that enable the East African Asian migrant in Europe and North America to visualize her/himself as belonging to both East Africa and "elsewhere," or "here" and "there," and in between the two spaces simultaneously. Esther Peeren elucidates the notion of the multiple experiences of diasporic subjects in her deployment of Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to understand the convergence of space and time in diasporic experience. She argues that leaving the homeland need not imply a complete loss of its way of life and subjectivity, since multiple places can share the same organizing chronotope. She writes:

> Diasporic subjects are never wholly part of either the home or the host chronotope; they do not move from one to the other without the inference of memory, but are always in negotiation with both. Their lives and identities are governed by a diasporic chronotope that is inherently split into two (or more) parts that are inflected through each other. (2007, p. 74)

Esther Peeren's conceptualization of diaspora as chronotopical helps us understand how these multiple worlds are produced through a combination of particular types of space and time. Working from Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, Peeren conceives diaspora as "a specific ideological construction of space and time that governs the lives of diasporic subjects in a performative manner" (2006, p. 70). This spatiotemporal reading of diaspora, in which time and space are conceived "as fundamentally interlinked in the production of diaspora subjectivity" (ibid., p. 72), allows us to appreciate the coexistence of a multiplicity of temporal realities and cultural cartographies as markers of diasporic worlds.

In *The Gunny Sack,* for instance, the diasporic (hi)stories of Salim's family, as narrated by himself, are intersections of multiple cultural spaces and periods that have finally given rise to unstable identities like his, "… anybody. No trace of tribe, caste, colour, even continent of origin" (Vassanji, 1989, p. 108). Just as in Siddiqi's *The Feast of Nine Virgins*, the narrative of *The Gunny Sack* darts restlessly between continents as it tries to thread together the multiple hi/stories that influence the characters' present. In a moment of self-reflexivity, Salim experiences memory as "cotton balls gliding from the gunny sack, each a window to a world … Asynchronous images projected on multiple cinema screens," and time "is not a continuous coordinate … but a collection of blots …" (ibid., p. 112). This very asynchrony is emplotted in the text as a narrative strategy for coagulating different, even antagonistic timespaces. It is a strategy that frees the narration from the strictures of teleology and closure, allowing Salim's stories to begin from different times and places (Canada, Zanzibar, India) and travel forth and back across continents already traversed by the Indian people.

Thus, the diasporic perspective adopted by East African Asian writings reworlds the East African nation-state by problematizing the relationship between decentered and hybrid memories of the diasporic subject, and the supposedly stable and homogenous memory formations constituted within the nation-state. In this case, diaspora and diasporic identities work within, against, and/or around national identities to construct plural spaces for enacting the difference of the diasporic subject. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vassanji revisits Indians' ambivalent relationship with Kenya's national history. Unlike in early novels such as *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*—where the concern is the impossibility of belonging to, and the inevitability of departure from East Africa—this later novel demonstrates the Asians' complex entanglement with Kenya's equally contested histories. Several trajectories of relating Indian experience to Kenya's history emerge: first, Indians are in Kenya as subjects of the expansive British Empire. Vikram's grandfather, like other Indians, came from British India to work on the Uganda railway. In colonial Kenya, they created a buffer zone between white privilege and black misery. But several years later, African nationalism threw their safe haven into disarray as the British Empire collapsed.

The question posed by the novel is whether or not the perceived collaboration with colonial authorities erased Indians' contribution to the new Kenya; for if the new Kenya is also understood in terms of physical symbols of modernity, like the railway, the shop, and the

bazaar, then the appreciation of Asian participation in the reworlding of modern Kenya was inevitable. To legitimize his claims to the land, the narrator rereads aspects of Kenyan history as significant milestones in the formation of modern Kenya:

> We have been Africans for three generations, not counting my own children. Family legend has it that one of the rails on the railway line just outside the Nakuru station has engraved upon it my paternal grandfather's name, Anand Lal Peshawari, in Punjabi script … the railway line running from Mombasa to Kampala, proud "Permanent Way" of the "British Gateway to the African Jewel," was our claim to the land. Mile upon mile, rail next to thirty-foot rail, fishplate to follow fishplate, it had been laid by my father and his fellow Punjabi labourers … (Vassanji, 2003, pp. 16–17)

In postcolonial Kenya, the railway would achieve a variety of symbols and significance: it would stand as a symbol of colonial conquest and exploitation, of Kenya's entry into modernity, of Indian affiliation with the land and their role in ushering Kenya into this modernity. In a sense, the fluid symbolic status of the railway mirrors the ambivalent relationship of East African Asian experiences to Kenya's nationalist histories.

But while the concepts of nation and diaspora as worlding tools can act as invaluable analytical tools for understanding identity formations within these spaces, they run the risk of decontextualizing and even dehistoricizing diasporic experiences by focusing on what Radhakrishnan has called diaspora's "perennial liminality," instead of the condition of pain and double alienation that define its condition.[3]

In the introductory chapter to his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, Vijay Mishra plays with the opening sentence of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and comes up with the following statement: "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way." In a sense, this statement reminds us that although diasporas share common prominent characteristics—i.e., the common features in the typologies and taxonomies produced by Robin Cohen (2008) and William Safran (1991), for example, or the core elements expounded by Brubaker above—the nature of their character is to be found in such dimensions as differentiation, identity, and historicity. This is all the more so with regard to the Indian diaspora, whose huge size and historical and spatial multi-locatedness resist any form of homogenization. Nowhere are these dimensions better articulated than in the literature of diaspora communities. It is in locating East African Indian writing within the historical circumstances of its production that we begin to understand how this diaspora constitutes a space that is "contextually embedded in other spaces by virtue of constitutive relations they share with other places, things, practices, and persons" (Jones, Nast, & Roberts, 1997, p. xxvii). In other words, a diasporic space is an intersectional space. This space is, to appropriate Anthias term, "translocational," a term she uses to describe:

> … the ways in which social locations are products of particular constellations of social relations, and in terms of relationality and experience at determinate points in time … It points to the existence of contradictory and shifting social locations where one might be in a position of dominance and subordination simultaneously on the one hand or at different times or spaces on the other." (2008, p. 107)

In a sense, the diasporic subject is caught within intersecting social and even national boundaries. If anything, the diasporic subject is defined not only by the multiplicity of locations and identities it is heir to, but also by the convergence of pluralistic spaces and temporalities. The narrator in Jameela Siddiqi's *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* contemplates this kind of multiple realities thus:

> Born in Bombay, raised in Mombasa, married in Kampala, educated in London, worked in Tehran, lived in New York, then Stuttgart, then Hong Kong, and died in Vancouver. Where was this person actually from? Where is anyone from these days? Where do they live? (Siddiqi, 2001, p. 1).

In conclusion, I argue that East African Indian writing, as demonstrated here by the fiction of M. G. Vassanji, presents diasporic realities as worlds constituted by intersections of multiple cultural spaces and periods that have finally given rise to unstable and fluid identities marked by different and even antagonistic temporalities.

Notes

1. As commonly used in East Africa, the term "Asians" encompasses diverse and distinct communities with different languages, ethnicities, and religious affiliations, and which even come from different regions of South Asia. In this work, I use the terms "Asian" and "Indian" interchangeably.

2. Marko Juvan (2019) and Pheng Cheah (2016) argue that Spivak introduced Heidegger's concept of "worlding" to the field of postcolonial studies to critique Western narratives' representation of the colonized as dependent on the imperial cultural mission.

3. Radhakrishnan argues against the danger of the hyperrealization of diaspora. "The context of diaspora has the capacity to exacerbate the disharmony between utopia realities available exclusively through theory and agential predicaments experienced in history … To the diasporic sensibility, it is easy to practice a perennial politics of transgression in radical postponement of the politics of constituency" (74).

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