**Transnational Movements, the Unhomely and the Politics of Belonging in Peter Nazareth’s *In a Brown Mantle* and M. G. Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack***

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Postcolonial Asian East African fiction chronicles the arrival of Asians in the western Indian Ocean and how their association with British colonialism later triggers post-independence political backlashes, dispersing the group to metropolises across Europe, the US and Canada. This fiction shows that the demarcation of the western Indian Ocean littoral into post-colonial nation-states brings with it new regimes of citizenship and belonging, displacing old practices of migrancy and settlership, as extensive and untrammelled transoceanic and cross-border movements, especially under colonialism, give way to greater border controls under the new dispensation. The complex web of mobility, exchange and transnational affiliations that unfolds against the backdrop of the transition from colonialism to independence complicates notions of home and national belonging. Representations of these processes in Peter Nazareth’s *In a Brown Mantle* (1972) and M. G. Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack* (1989) foreground the nation as a site where nationalist politics and diaspora consciousness jostle for the determination of Asians’ subjecthood and legitimacy in the emerging post-independence nation-states.

I engage with how the two novels construct the Western Indian Ocean as a site for the confluence of African, Asian and European cultural streams, highlighting how the different modes of performing cultural identity within or astride national borders is structured on tensions between filiation and affiliation. This idea echoes Werner Sollors’s argument that all American ethnic literature, whether African American or Jewish American, etc, is structured alike, by the tension between filiation and affiliation. Implicit here is the idea that modern identity has more to do with the fact of being a minority than with the actual place one’s ancestors came from. Such a view is not oblivious to the fact that diasporic identity functions differently from that of autochthons and how each category relates to the nation-state. But it seems that for both, nationalist pedagogy, with its clarion call to national integration, presents with the imperatives for compliance.

Published in 1972, *In a Brown Mantle* is remarkable for its accurate prediction of Idi Amin’s expulsion of Asians later that same year. Emerging a year after Bahadur Tejani’s *Day After Tomorrow* at the height of Africanisation,[[1]](#footnote-1) the novel complicates Tejani’s earlier representation of Asians’ eagerness to claim belonging and their plea for the recognition, offering instead a model of post-colonial citizenship based on Asians’ evident contribution to nation-building. Nazareth emphasises a separate Goan identity rooted in the group’s association with the civil service as an implicit rejection of the homogenising Indian category commonly perceived as a race of exploiters, whose singular obsession is the nation’s economy. The novel is set largely in Damibia, Nazareth’s fictitionalised Uganda, with a cyclic plot that ends as it begins with the news about the assassination attempt on Robert Kyeyune, the country’s first post-independence Prime Minister, the fictional figure of A.M. Obote. Constructed as a fictional memoir, the novel relates the narrator’s confession of his entanglement in political corruption and a nation-building process that has taken a wrong turn. Narrated by Joseph D’Souza from London where he is exiled, the novel explores how the colonial history of Goans and their exploits under Portuguese and British colonialists shape their orientations towards nation-building in the narrative present. This problematic affiliation is emblematic of the "perpetual exile that Goans seem unable to end", as Nazareth, a second-generation migrant, captures in his reflections on editing an anthology of Goan Literature (374). As with the Goan presence in the country generally, the political corruption, ineptitude and the atmosphere of mutual suspicion between the Goans and Africans are constructed as postcolonial conditions. The novel takes stock of what it means for Goans to inhabit a heterogeneous, post-independent Damibia, relating – without excusing – the history of their association with British colonialism, while emphasising that the loyalty that a majority of them express towards the British Empire is tempered by notable cases of contribution to anti-colonial nationalism.

Similarly, *The Gunny Sack* amplifies the themes of mobility in the Western Indian Ocean, depicting Asians’ later dispersion to imperial metropolises as post-independence political backlashes. Like Nazareth, Vassanji constructs Asians’ experiences in East Africa as a postcolonial condition. Narrated from Boston, United States, where the narrator, Salim Juma, the great-grandson of the first-generation patriarch, Dhanji Govindji, is exiled, *The Gunny Sack* constructs the “West” as the preferred migration destination for Asians. Despite Asians’ long sojourn in East Africa, which in many cases becomes permanent settlements, the region, as in Nazareth’s novel, doubles as a connecting node on a complex migratory trajectory that begins from Junapur, India in 1880s. A member of Shamsis, a fictitious esoteric sect of Islam, Dhanji leaves Junapur, the ancestral birthplace of the sect, as part of a complicated exodus, impelled by inter-community conflicts that result from the establishment of the sect some three centuries earlier.[[2]](#footnote-2) His choice of destination, as with the rest of the Shamsis, is not accidental, for the sect is founded on the prophecy about the sun one day rising from the west, with a promise that its members should “wait for a saviour" (Vassanji 7). The novel constructs the westward journey partly as a spiritual quest for the long-awaited saviour, who three centuries later is yet to arrive.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Shamsis wander all over the East African coast throughout the colonial era. At the height of post-independence political pressures, many of them flee the region to imperial metropolises, continuing with what the novel depicts as their west-bound journey.

In designating these narratives as "postcolonial” instead of the more specific “immigrant genre”, as Rosemary Marangoly George proposes in her reading of *The Gunny Sack*, I recognise not only their inextricable link with the history of European colonisation across large parts of the Indian Ocean world and the resultant anti-colonial nationalisms but also their emergence during particular moments in the national histories of the region. George herself acknowledges that the immigrant genre, which, for her, is typified by the aforementioned novel, belongs to the wider gamut of postcolonial literature, generated as it is by experiences of global colonialism, and as such forms part of postcolonialism and decolonising discourse. For George, what is distinctive about the genre, besides its construction of immigration to the “West” and the straddling of multiple locations, is its characteristic “disregard for national schemes” through its proclivity towards spatio-temporal boundaries that are in excess of the nation’s and, especially, its detached treatment of conditions of homelessness, while privileging “the metaphor of luggage”, both spiritual and material, in ways that make it seem apolitical (72-75). I deviate from George’s otherwise useful separation of the immigrant genre from postcolonial literature in recognition of the significance of nationalist politics that generate these narratives, while simultaneously remaining cognisant of the transnational and global networks in which the diasporic subjects they represent are caught up and how these complicate notions of "home" and belonging.

More importantly, I do so to show that these narratives are products of particular nationalist politics that are themselves implicated in wider imperial and anti-imperial nationalisms that seek to offer competing universalisms. Produced by a combination of local and transnational forces, *In a Brown Mantle* and *The Gunny Sack* grapple with a complex web of national and global politics. In the two novels, the transition from colonialism to political independence – and the attendant disintegration of the western Indian Ocean world into the emerging nations-states – has far-reaching socio-political ramifications for Asians. These historical and political developments demarcate, in Vijay Mishra’s terms, the "old" and "new" diasporas, which, as products of maritime mercantile capitalism and the post-1960s global migrations, respectively, inhabit two different kinds of locations. Mishra points out that the subjects of the old diaspora, in the colonial or post-colonial spaces they occupy, are implicated in a complex relationship with other (formerly) colonised host/national peoples, while those of the new diaspora, having entered metropolises of the former imperial masters or other white settler countries negotiate their subjecthood within a multicultural paradigm along with other immigrants from former colonies (13).

In the post-colonial climate in which Nazareth’s and Vassanji’s novels emerge, the desire for, and the question of, national belonging and Afro-Asian engagements are shaped by two interrelated ideological pursuits – one local and the other global – that the postcolonial governments in Damibia/Uganda and Tanzania embarked on shortly after independence. The local one comprised programmes of economic nationalism, which in Uganda becomes popularly known as Africanisation, designed largely to mitigate Asians’ stronghold on the economy (cf. Mamdani’s "Ugandan Asian Expulsion"). The global one was an offshoot of the loose anti-imperial Third World alliance born out of the 1955 Bandung Conference, which in both countries, involved a move to the left. The two ideological pursuits are articulated in the Arusha Declaration (1967) and the Common Man’s Charter (1969), which the immediate post-independence governments in Tanzania and Uganda, respectively, passed to present to their citizenry popular versions of socialism as a vital initial step toward the actualisation of the full meaning of independence and the realisation of national ideals.[[4]](#footnote-4) Each of the two documents crystallises the respective government’s policy resolutions, articulating proposals for national service. The so-called Asian exodus of the late 1960s and early 1970s that Nazareth’s and Vassanji’s novels imagine is mainly fuelled by these ideological pursuits. Thus, for a more productive reading, I draw attention to these political developments as motivating impulses behind the two novels, insisting on the need to read them against the context in which they emerge.

In the three sections that follow, I explore, first, the early history of Asians in East Africa and the implications of the transition from colonialism to political independence. This transition produces new diasporas in the west, with complex relationships with the old one, which is embroiled in a problematic relationship with the home/host nations. Second, I explore how the experience of migration and the complex affiliations that result from it complicate questions of belonging, especially in the post-independence dispensation. Third, I turn to how the plotting of the two novels represents a search for a workable model of post-colonial citizenship. I conclude that Asians’ victimisation in the wake of the immediate post-independence nationalist fervour, are shown to stem less from popular perception towards the diasporic subjects as vestiges of imperialism than from their failure to adjust to the demands of the post-independence dispensation.

**From the western Indian Ocean to the nation-states**

*In a Brown Mantle* and *The Gunny Sack* paint a long history of circulations in the western Indian Ocean, which predates European colonialism by several centuries. This history, in light of Erik Gilbert’s periodisation, can be demarcated into the period from 1000-1750 with Arabs, Persians, Indians, Chinese and the Portuguese as the main actors. Although Gilbert characterises this period as marked by minimal regional processes, some of its enduring legacies such as Islam and the Swahili culture have endured to the present time. The second distinct period, marked by Europe’s capitalist expansion, is framed by the rise and, eventually, the collapse of mercantile capitalism and, with it, new patterns of imperialism – dates from 1750–1960. Gilbert credits British colonialism across the region for galvanising regional processes for more intensive cultural productions during the period in question, with empire-building, migration, and long-distance trade occurring on a much more dramatic scale. The third in Gilbert’s periodisation is the post-independence era of nation-states, dating from the early 1960s, with the dawning of political independence, to the present. This period, besides registering the emergence of the nation-state in East Africa, also marks the end of the great age of steam ships and dhows. The discovery and exploitation of oil in the Persian Gulf further introduces new migration patterns and an era of air travel, which further quicken the dissolution of the western Indian Ocean as an integral geographic unit, with the influx of people from outside the region (Gilbert 17).

Gilbert’s historiography, in emphasising the intensity of cultural creation under the British, risks obscuring how mercantile and colonial capitalism from 1750s to early 1960s drastically changed the terms of engagement among the different peoples in the region. Writers such as Amitav Ghosh have argued accordingly that European colonialism actually presented a disruptive influence on the cosmopolitanism that existed in the region. Ghosh maintains that colonial domination, far from galvanising meaningful cultural conversations, actually forestalled them. Thus, in the field of culture, the period of decolonisation represented "attempts to restore and recommence the exchanges and conversations that had been interrupted by the long centuries of European imperial dominance” (37). Ghosh’s view on the resumption of this "interrupted cosmopolitanism" as the “necessary and vital counterpart of the nationalist idiom of anti-colonial resistance” resonates with the spirit of Bandung – or its brainchild, the Non-Aligned Movement – in its denunciation of all forces of imperialism.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rather than spawning this harmony or cosmopolitanism, the Movement, Ghosh contends, was "an institutional aspect of a much broader and older cultural and political tendency” (38). Animated by desires and hopes for a certain kind of universalism and a continuance of Afro-Asian cultural exchange, the Bandung Conference and Non-Aligned Movement after it sought to ensure that the cosmopolitanism of the old Indian Ocean world lives on in the post-colonial moment of the nation-states.

*In a Brown Mantle* and *The Gunny Sack* show that the practicability of this grand vision rests, on the one hand, on how Asians view their destiny and negotiate the critical question of affiliation in the post-independence moment and, on the other, on how the nation-states react to their presence. Given the diaspora’s association with British colonialism and their orientation towards the UK, the transition from colonial domination to political independence becomes increasingly significant. Drawing on what he regards as a central, yet hitherto unacknowledged, connection between colonialism and diasporisation, Ato Quayson adds an important dimension to understanding the regional processes and inter-racial engagements facilitated by colonialism. Colonial space-making through the instrumentalisation of diaspora, Quayson argues, beyond simply establishing and demarcating a geographical reality projects particular socio-political ethos upon such spaces. Most importantly, colonial politics, he points out, involved altering pre-existing relations among local groups over whom it established control (245). The two novels show that the steady intensification of diasporisation and the simultaneous weakening of Afro-Asian engagements stem largely from the racial consciousness inculcated by colonialism as part of its modality of control.

*In a Brown Mantle* and *The Gunny* *Sack* thus strive to put in perspective the history of Asians under colonialism and their entry into the post-independence moment. The two novels challenge prevailing perceptions of Asians as colonial stooges and the concomitant post-independence politics that brand them as vestiges of colonialism and, as such, as objects of further decolonisation processes. They offer more redeeming narratives of Asians’ purchase on the nation-states in the region to legitimate their claims of belonging and citizenship. Writing in the wake of post-independence political backlashes, Nazareth and Vassanji grapple with issues that complicate Afro-Asian engagements both under colonialism and after political independence. The logic of their emplotment encourages us to read the novels as works generated by the tensions in the new heterogeneous, post-independence nation-states.

Nazareth’s novel presents a long flashback of Goa’s history of colonial domination, which accounts for Goans’ presence of in East Africa and rationalises their political loyalty and orientation towards the British Empire. The Goan seafarers, who leave Goa first for British India and, later, East Africa, are shown to follow the routes charted by their successive imperial masters. Their mobility and shifting allegiances are constructed both as signs of, and subterfuges against, their vulnerability in the face of the vagaries of imperialism. The novel constructs Goa’s vicissitudes as determining Goan character as captured in this condensed history of the land:

Hardly anybody paid any attention to Goa until India decided a few years ago to re-conquer it from the Portuguese who had ruled it for four hundred and fifty years. The world cried "Aggression" against India. Then the world started crying "Aggression" on behalf of India against China who, it was said, had attacked India at the border on the pretext that the land was originally Chinese. Meanwhile, having got used to the idea of being Indian once again instead of Portuguese, Goans started wondering what it would be like to be Chinese. (Nazareth 2-3)

In a geopolitical climate where allegiances are ever shifting, the Goans quickly learn the costliness and futility of resisting such onslaughts. Exposed to unrelenting colonial aggressions, they learn the expedience of yielding to colonial authority with a lasting sense of fatalism, opting for security. The novel implicates the efficiency of the propaganda machinery of the British colonialists, in cohort with the tendency of the Goans themselves to kowtow to the former, for the latter’s failure to realise that they are in Eastern Africa due to shortage of opportunities in Goa – itself a colonial condition – not out of the benevolence of their colonial masters (4-5). Nazareth attributes this loss of perspective to Goans’ servitude, a condition of their long history of imperial domination.

The vulnerability of Goans and their loyalty to successive colonial masters shape their migratory trajectories. Abala and Zindere – Nazareth’s fictional codes for Entebbe and Kampala – are just two nodes along a winding circuit that begins from Goa and, through Bombay, winds up in London. What sustains this transnational migration pattern is the promise of better opportunities that Empire extends but seems unable to deliver on. D’Souza’s father leaves Bombay for Abala where he, like those who had preceded him, joins the British colonial Civil Service. The reason for this choice is said to be “embedded in the bitter history of our race”, a "history of conquests and reconquests – rule by Hindu empire-builders, Moslem imperialists, and finally Portuguese" (Nazareth 3). Subjection to this long chain of colonial domination conditions the Goans to embrace collaboration as a subterfuge against powerful adversaries, believing as they do that their very survival depended on how wisely they negotiate their loyalty. As such, forging anti-colonial alliance with Africans against the British colonialists in keeping with the politics advocated for by D’Souza and Pius Cota – a Goan nationalist from Mosaki, Azingwe (Nazareth’s fictional codes for Nairobi, Kenya) – could not have been more un-Goan.

The novel shows that the desire for opportunity, stability and safety that brings Goans to Damibia is undermined by their primary loyalty to Goa and sympathy towards the British colonialists at the expense of identifying with Damibia’s anti-colonial struggle. This loyalty and sympathy in the Goan psyche are inextricably linked and are generated by, their self-perception as immutable colonial subjects. D’Souza’s father, for one, in drawing Pius Cota’s attention to the need for loyalty towards the British, asks the young radical nationalist who seeks to rally his fellow Goans against British colonialism, “whether, as an immigrant race, we could bite the hand that fed us what we could not obtain at home." Articulating a sojourner’s consciousness, the older D’Souza wonders "whether an immigrant race could get involved in somebody else’s fight" (Nazareth 11). This acknowledgement of gratitude, and the concomitant loyalty towards British imperialism that it produces, undermines Goans’ participation in nationalist struggle and claim to belonging in the post-independence Damibia. Thus, the transition to political independence shatters the old colonial order in which they had invested so much faith, heightening their anxiety. Written at the height of Africanisation and the resultant upsurge in the “exodus” of Asians to imperial metropolises,[[6]](#footnote-6) the novel is motivated by the urgency to relate the story of how Goans awaken from colonial servitude to the realities of post-independence politics as they adjust from their sense of selfhood as colonial subjects to post-colonial citizens. In D’Souza and Cota, the novel showcases Goans’ contribution to the process of nation-building.

Unlike Nazareth, who constructs Goans’ migratory trajectory as an expedient response to successive waves of imperial onslaughts, Vassanji imagines that of the Shamsis – their quest for the west (Africa being the most immediate westerly destination) – as having both spiritual and economic dimensions. Besides the interest in the long-awaited saviour, Shamsis’ journey across the Indian Ocean is also driven by tales of riches that continued to reach Junapur from Zanzibar. Salim remembers that "men returned from Zanzibar invariably rich" (Vassanji 8). Dhanji yields to the allure and leaves Junapur for the island. As the hub of commerce in the western shores of the Indian Ocean, Zanzibar is a thriving cosmopolitan site. Dhanji’s first impression of it is that of "a dream city suddenly rising from the ocean, with its brilliant, luxuriant verdure, the shimmering white of the Arab houses in the foreground, the numerous dhows… of different flags in its harbour" (Vassanji 8). The novel constructs the exchange between the subcontinent and Zanzibar to be centuries old. Dhanji’s arrival on the island in the late nineteenth century is preceded by those of other migrants who, over the centuries, voyaged across the ocean to partake of the lucrative trade in slaves, spices and other precious commodities that the island boasts.

With the ease of mobility that the western Indian Ocean region affords, Dhanji soon leaves Zanzibar for Matamu on the mainland. He capitalises on the diasporic network that the region boasts by contacting the local *mukhi* – the religious/cultural head of the Shamsis – to help him settle in this new location (Vassanji 10). In Vassanji’s fictitious scheme, the mukhi*,* or the Shamsis community generally, in Peter Simatei’s expression “provides the centre that enables a re-enactment of Indian identity and is therefore the symbolic link with mother India” (87). Ironically, however, it is the Matamu mukhi*,* Ragavji Devraj*,* who, in his endeavour to help Dhanji establish himself, sets him up with an African former slave woman, Bibi Taratibu, who eventually bears him a son, Huseni, the narrator’s grandfather. The Dhanji-Taratibu liaison is emblematic of the widespread pattern of miscegenation in the region, which, with the consolidation of diasporic presence, attracts strong outcry from India, resulting in the sending of "missionaries" to the region to keep the community in line (Vassanji 11). Dhanji, from a combination of pressures from his community and his own growing prosperity, marries Fatima, an Indian-Zanzibari woman, who bears the rest of their other children.

*The Gunny Sack* plots the vicissitudes and wanderings of the Govindjis across the East African coast, with several of them ending up in the West. The family’s history, as part of the wider Asian experience in East Africa, is contained in the eponymous gunny sack that Ji Bai, Dhanji’s daughter-in-law, bequeaths to Salim. When Salim receives the sack after Ji Bai’s death, he finds inside it an assortment of paraphernalia from which he is able to piece together the family’s troubled biography. The gunny sack, as Derek Wright maintains, emerges in the narrative as a confluence of memory and imagination, history and fiction. This intersection emerges as an important site from which the past is invoked to legitimate the present. Wright highlights that the sack’s nickname, "Shehrbanoo" – or "Shehru" as Salim shortens it – conflates Scheherazade and Shahryar, respectively the narrator and the narratee of *Arabian Nights*. In this tale compilation, Scheherazade faces imminent death in keeping with Shahryar’s daily ritual of marrying a new virgin and having her beheaded the next day. The wily Scheherazade postpones her death indefinitely by regaling her heartless husband-king with thrilling tales that she tactfully leaves unfinished night after night under the pretext of having run out of time with dawn fast-approaching. Each subsequent day the king spares Scheherazade’s life so that she can finish the tale only for her to repeat the same strategy the next night. A thousand and one nights later, a much humanised and wiser Shahryar spares Scheherazade’s life and marries her, having had three children with her in the course of those long nights.

Wright aptly observes that the nickname “Shehrbanoo” connotes the simultaneity of the sack’s roles as the narrator and the narrated. Each object in the sack has biographical exploits that make it a repository of the memory of the Govindjis’ early experience on the coast. In Wright’s term’s, "the gunny sack itself constitutes the history that it memorialises" (126). The sack gains significance in the narrative in the way it resists manifold attempts by the Govindjis to destroy it in their attempt to sever themselves their unsavoury past. But the pressure to break with the past is matched by the capacity of the same to perpetuate itself by virtually becoming the source of its own sustenance. In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, Vassanji describes the unease that association with the past stirs in Asians after arriving in the West as an “immigrant syndrome.” Its remedy, Vassanji suggest, is to acknowledge the past, in order that it may become real (25). For Salim, who is keen to piece together the contained memory, the survival of the gunny sack, like that of Scheherazade, depends on its capacity to satisfy that need.

The anxiety that the Govindjis have about their past stems largely from their attempt to escape traces of black ancestry in the family. In his early endeavour to grapple with the “stain”, Dhanji forbids contacts between Huseni and his African mother in order to maintain the family’s "respectability”, resulting in the son’s permanent estrangement from home (Vassanji 22). In his futile search for his disappeared son, Dhanji traverses the plains and coastal towns in the western Indian Ocean, exhausting all his fortunes in the quest before encroaching on the community’s funds entrusted to his care as the mukhi. His fruitless journeys in search of Huseni become a plotting device in the novel. Wright reads Dhanji’s appropriation of the community’s fund symbolically as the "siphoning off [of] part of India in pursuit of the piece of Africa he has engendered, the Africa in himself" (135). The patriarch pays the ultimate penalty for this indiscretion, which not only leaves his already impoverished family wallowing in even deeper desperation but also cuts them off from their community. Later, the Govindjis are forced to change their family name to Hasham to escape the "*double* shame of sin against community and… God" (Vassanji 138). Their wanderings underscore the ease of mobility in the old western Indian Ocean world and the attendant economic possibilities for which the Asians, as in Nazareth’s novel, credits the British (Vassanji 31). The progress of diasporic subjects within the colonial economy is dependent on their position as a buffer between European colonialists and Africans, which encourages their perception as part of the larger “success story” of colonialism.

The coming of political independence, however, turns the table against the Asians. The now-sovereign nation-state does not only circumscribe cross-border movements that colonialism had eased but also injects new nationalist ideologies and political ideals, unsettling the old colonial order. Where the British colonialists prized Asians’ middle-man role in the economy, the new post-independence government, with its commitment to socialism, now sees them as exploitative capitalists and vestiges of colonialism. The social insularity of the Asians further exacerbates popular perception of them as an alien presence.[[7]](#footnote-7) Consequently, they are viewed as threats to the independence of the new nation. As part of the remedy, the nationalisation of their properties, following the Arusha Declaration, replicates Africanisation initiatives that generate much of the tension in Nazareth’s *In a Brown Mantle*. Where Dhanji had revelled over Asians’ success under the British, Hassan Uncle now laments in the wake of TANU’s nationalisation drive: “We are washed out” (Vassanji 242). Uttered by Hassan, whose contempt for Tanzania’s independence is undisguised, the lament carries a twist of irony. The novel suggests that independence calls for the kind of realignment that most Asians are unprepared or unwilling to make.

Vassanji’s novel constructs the Declaration as just another version Africanisation politics which, in Uganda, culminates in the 1972 expulsion. The parallel between the two political developments becomes evident in the way they galvanise the Asian exodus of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Focusing on the expulsion as the culmination of Africanisation, Salim remarks that it "cracked our world open like an egg” (Vassanji 246). Underscoring how the expulsion re-orients the Ugandan Asians, he further elaborates:

There was a world, outside this egg, that you could escape to. Previously, even less than a year ago, going there was like going to the moon: only a few brave souls went to its alien loneliness and survived precariously. Only a few months ago the pious would tell you about the moral degeneracy of the West. Now there were Ugandan Asians in India, Pakistan, UK, US, Canada and Australia. (Vassanji 246-67)

The anxieties that post-independence Africanisation politics leaves in its wake disperse Asians to destinations across imperial metropolises and the subcontinent. Imperilled by his agitation for political reform, Salim, for his part, flees Dar es Salaam for Lisbon and eventually Boston. His family – mother, wife and daughter – migrates to New York. Despite the political tenor of these flights, however, Vassanji, remarkable for his aversion to oversimplification, simultaneously draws attention to their personal underpinnings. In Salim’s case, for instance, exile is also a flight from marriage, from “an impossible domestic situation… like [his] grandfather, Huseni… and even his father Dhanji Govindji who went to look for him" (Vassanji 265). Through this conflation of the personal and the political, the novel, in Salim’s desire for an end to these repetitious flights, gropes for closure. But there remains a lingering unease that even the new location will continue to deal the restlessness that impels him to flee Tanzania, for double displacement, as Tina Steiner argues, far from mitigating the disorientation and anxiety about migration, exacerbates it as it signifies a failure to assert belonging (126-27).

**The unhomely and the national question**

Extending from the subcontinent to the west, the transnational trajectories plotted in *In a Brown Mantle* and *The Gunny Sack* complicate questions of home and negotiations of belonging in the post-colonial moment. In these novels, the interstitial spaces that the Asians inhabit unsettle simplistic notions of home and home-nation. As structures of both exclusion and inclusion, these spaces are critical to understanding not only the anxieties that migration and relocation produce but also the subsequent question of affiliation and its determination in a post-colonial context. As migrant and post-colonial subjects, Asians are constructed simultaneously as perpetrators and victims of exclusion; they are self-defined – and defined by others – as belonging and not belonging to the nation. The determination of the question of belonging hinges on the distinction that George, in her insightful work on politics of home, draws, after Edward Said, between two levels of affinity – "filiation" (biological ties) and "affiliation" (socially constructed ones), with a progressive privileging of the latter (16). In both novels, filiations via migratory history and diasporic networks connect the Asians to the subcontinent whereas affiliations are either negotiated on the basis of their long history of settlement or denied due to their association with the British Empire.

In these novels, the urgency to negotiate affiliations is compounded by the competing demands of the different locations of migrant/diasporic subjects, who, as Wright observes, are defined, simultaneously, by their origins as well as their destinations. Wright maintains that immigrants face the challenge of accommodating themselves to their new locations as well as modifying these locations to suit them (137). Deemphasising impacts of location and political agency, critics such as Simon Lewis read postcolonial Asian East African fiction rather pessimistically. Maintaining that diasporic identity in Asian East African fiction has more to do with "a shared sense of homelessness than with a shared sense of home”, Lewis ponders what happens to political agency and subject formation when individual identity is problematic (217). He contends that the kind of postcolonial subject produced by conditions of homelessness is one not so much concerned with dual identity as in other postcolonial fictions but with non-identity, "which renders their various flights ever away from, never towards (or even between) homes” (222). Nazareth’s and Vassanji’s novels, against this reading, reveal that identification is produced by the diasporic subjects’ engagements with the locations they call home or to which they seek to belong. In these novels, what the various configurations of home underscore is that migration, far from being a condition of homelessness, demands and invariably involves the process of home-making.

The deferral of that process, either due to stronger attachment to the “homeland” or in preference for more desirable destinations, engenders a weaker affinity with the respective home/host-nation, which should not be confused with homelessness but, rather, viewed as a particular condition of relocation. Privileging their diaspora consciousness or association with the west, for instance, Asian East Africans tend to eschew any claim by postcolonial nationalism on them, while, as citizens, maintaining a civic affiliation with their home/host-nations. What Nazareth’s and Vassanji’s novels thus underscore is not the incidental condition of homelessness but the politics that complicate Asians’ presence in East Africa. This complication is constructed as emanating from the interplay between the diaspora’s own desire for a limited – or, in some cases, non- – affinity with the nation-state and the backlash that such tendencies generate. The two factors combine to make the region all the more “unhomely”, to use Bhabha’s handy term. For Bhabha, the unhomely captures not conditions of homelessness but the disorienting effects of *relocations of home* in the aftermath of migration (141). Where homelessness defines a rather ephemeral, incidental condition, the unhomely extends to the overall experience of migration and relocation. To ignore this distinction is to subject these novels to a skewed reading that fails to take stock of the impulses that motivate them.

In amplifying this point, I contend that Nazareth’s and Vassanji’s novels are products of particular nationalist politics that repeatedly breaks to the surface of their respective narratives. The processes of home-making and negotiations of belonging in these novels emerge as a necessary response to the disorienting effects of relocation and shockwaves of Africanisation politics in the aftermath of political independence. Representing the desire to assert belonging, each of these novels situates itself as a counter-version to the dominant national discourse in the respective country that produces it. Thus, other than unwriting the nation, as George maintains in “Travelling Light" (83), the novels resonate, instead, with Bhabha’s notion in *Location of Culture of* writing the nation from the margin (8). Such a posture invites the need to refocus the nation – and, by extension, the nationalist politics that generate the narratives – for a more productive reading.

Generated by the fallout with post-independence nationalist politics, *In a Brown Mantle* and *The Gunny Sack*, while chronicling the making of the new diaspora in the wake of Africanisation politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, underscore Asians’ purchase on East Africa and construct their history from a more redeeming perspective. Simatei emphasises this point in his recent reading of the tensions between diasporic memories and national histories, arguing that "the very act of writing the Asian presence in East Africa is in itself an attempt to uncover connections to histories of resistance that get suppressed when the stereotype of Asians as collaborators of colonialism is amplified within the official discourse of nation-building" (57). Simatei highlights that the nation remains the site to which Asian East Africans return to enact their difference even as they perform their cultural identity, suggesting “the continuing significance of the nation as the site of enacting the politics of identity” (57). The dismissal of the nation from critical engagements with these novels, especially by western critics, stems from their tendency to emphasise these works’ circulation within the global system (Kalliney 5), the problematic national allegiance and conditions of homelessness that they imagine (Lewis 216-17) or their purported “disregard for national schemes” (George 72). While these arguments are enriching in the ways they amplify the global dimensions of these works, their blindness to local politics, which is really the thrust of the narratives, produce skewed readings.

Both Nazareth’s and Vassanji’s novels are firmly grounded in the local, largely in a bid to affirm Asians’ legitimacy in the nation-states even though that end often fails. Narratives of Asians’ experience take a different significance when viewed against the prevailing political rhetoric that depict diasporic subjects as an appendage of colonialism, which should thus have no part in the post-independence dispensation. As counter-narratives, the two novels give a different spin to their respective national narratives by not only highlighting Asians’ investment in anti-colonial nationalism and nation-building but also, more significantly, retelling the history of Asians, especially their relationship with British colonialism, from a different perspective. Their cooption into the colonial project appears in a different light when read against those of the African political and military elite, who upon inheriting the state from the departing colonialists become Asians’ main detractors. The novels suggest that if Asians stand condemned for their association with colonialism, they should share the dock with the new African political, bureaucratic and military elite. As an implicit critique of the reductive, racialised reading of post-independence politics, the two novels – Vassanji’s more so than Nazareth’s – construct the fate of their characters as symptomatic of the wider betrayal of the ideals of political independence. The unhomely thus emerges not as the antithesis of the nation but, rather, as a manifestation of its inherent contradictions.

In both novels, Asians are alienated, paradoxically, for their attempt to mitigate unhomely conditions that attend their presence in East Africa. As Simatei argues, the entry of the diaspora into the emerging post-colonial nation is complicated by "its essentialist and regressive self-portrayal as a guest community”, determined as it is to insulate itself from the rest of the East Africans in the hope of returning to the “homeland” untainted (58). This diasporic desire, as Vassanji notes in "Life at the Margins" springs not only East Africa’s physical proximity to India, but also the distinctive fact that Asian East Africans migrated to the region as communities, preserving their language, religion, sect and caste (117). While these trappings of Asianness enable the migrants to constitute themselves into a diaspora, the resultant insularity becomes problematic with the onset of political independence. In the new dispensation, these "cultural knapsack[s]”, as George terms them, far from being "movable asset[s]”, become burdensome, complicating the diaspora’ affiliation (73). In Salim’s experience, the out-of-place metallic trunk that he lugs to the national service camp becomes the very instrument for his punishment. Salim remarks: "We Indians have barged into Africa with our big black trunk, and every time it comes in our way" (204). Salim’s experience emerges as a statement of East Africa’s aversion to Asians’ performance of diaspora identity.

In the context of the mid-twentieth century anti-colonial rhetoric – and its corollary, the unity of all colonised peoples – the hostility towards articulations of diasporic difference conceals the demand for assimilation as part of the full dissolution of the colonial order. The old privileges that that survive the demise of formal colonialism exacerbate the divide between citizens and “foreigners” in the nation-state. For independence to be seen to have dismantled the colonial order, the privileged world of the Asian can no longer be entertained as part of the new dispensation. The predicaments that Asians face largely have their roots in colonialism itself, which as Engseng Ho highlights, recognised rights as inhering in collectivities. Thus, claims advanced by indigenous nations and cultures increasingly followed similar logic (247). The transition to political independence brings with it tighter national boundaries, obligating the straddling diasporic subjects to decide where to belong. Ho notes further that “[d]iasporic circuits of travel and return [become] troublesome, if not suspect” as diasporas are increasingly regarded as anomalous (247). The grammar of belonging in the post-independence moment, and the urgency towards full decolonisation, demands that the diaspora must prove that they are assimilable or be excluded or evicted as in the 1964 Zanzibar revolution that prefigures the 1972 expulsion.

In Nazareth’s and Vassanji’s novels, the urgency to assert belonging emerges as a necessary response to the politics of Africanisation in the anti-colonial period and in the immediate aftermath of political independence. Both D’souza and Salim identify with anti-colonial nationalism and nation-building processes in their respective countries. But their experiences reveal that their individual investments are no insurance against political alienation and subsequent victimisation. D’Souza views his dedication to the nation as a service to his fellow Goans, hoping this will win popular acceptance for them. Unfortunately, national service and popular acceptance in the post-independence moment prove incommensurate: “The harder any Asians in public office worked”, D’Souza laments, “the more it seemed to be taken for granted” (Nazareth 127-8). Identifying with anti-colonial nationalism alienates him even from his own Goan community. For Salim in *The Gunny Sack*, identification with the African part of his heritage and the resultant agitation for post-independence political reforms culminates in his exile. Salim’s choice here is significant for the way it contrasts with that made by his brother, Sona, who is more fascinated by the Asian part of his heritage. Thus, the two novels underscore the limitations of individual agency, suggesting that Asians’ alienation in the post-colonial nation-states stems from the failure to negotiate affiliation at the collective level.

**Engagements between Asians and East Africa(ns)**

*In a Brown Mantle* and *The Gunny Sack* reveal that communal prejudice and stereotypes jeopardise Afro-Asian engagements, complicating the diaspora’s presence in the post-independence nation. These complications are constructed as postcolonial conditions, originating largely from the hurried transference and imposition of a European mode of nationalism based on the nation-state upon varied, often rival and arbitrarily clustered ethnicities, posing serious challenge to the process of nation-building. The amalgamation of these different ethnicities into a cohesive nation is compounded by the very nature of British colonial projects in Uganda and Tanganyika. Wright points out that unlike in settler-colonies (e.g., Kenya, Southern Rhodesiaor South Africa) where land alienation forged a common bond between the masses and the elite, in protectorates (e.g., Uganda) and trusteeships (e.g., Tanganyika), there was little to unite the various classes and ethnicities into a concerted anti-colonial alliance. In such colonial holdings, the elite were simply groomed and co-opted into the system to continue from where the colonialists had left off at independence (4). Besides, the British colonialists in Uganda and Tanganyika recruited the Asians to fill the middle-man’s role, resulting in the latter’s eventual domination of the economic sector. The absence of any systematic overhaul of colonial structures at independence intensifies the pressure on the new elite to demonstrate to the masses the substance of political independence.

The process of decolonisation, which for both Uganda’s/Damibia’s and Tanzania’s governments ostensibly continues beyond political independence, intensifies the mutual suspicion between the Asians and the East African political elite. For one thing, association with British colonialists and uncertain affiliations with the nation-states limit Asians’ political presence in the moment of nation-building. For another, the socialist proclivity of the immediate post-independence governments in both Uganda/Damibia and Tanzania and the nationalisation programmes they pursue put the Asians and their businesses on the receiving end of populist, anti-capitalist ideologies. Capturing this tension, D’Souza observes:

Whereas the Asians were non-existent politically, physically they were all too real. They were the custom and immigration officials, the desk-clerks and managers, the shopkeepers, the landlords, etc., etc. and Damibia was supposed to be an African country! There *were* African businesses, but they were invisible. Our task, then, was to turn the towns of Damibia into visible African areas only speckled with Asians and Europeans. So many Asian businessmen were dispossessed by making it mandatory that only citizens ran businesses. (128)

What D’Souza captures here, even though he does not explicitly use the term, is the practice of Africanisation, designed to wrest the economy from “foreign influences” and “manipulations” and simultaneously empower the Africans. Historically, Africanisation pursuit combined the new nation’s vision of a leftist, post-war, “Third World” politics and its efforts to fortify itself against forces of global imperialism by dismantling local structures of capitalism. Nazareth’s conspicuous silence on the ideological impulse behind these nationalisation drives is significant, for the Common Man’s Charter that legalises the dispossession of Asians is adopted as an ideological and legal instrument of the Kyeyune (Obote I) government just a year before the novel’s publication. Nazareth evades engaging with the ideological underpinnings of Africanisation as part of the new nation’s decolonisation process. Such textual silence opens his novel to criticism for oversimplifying Afro-Asian tensions in Damibia.

The overlap between Kyeyune and Obote I – as that between Damibia and Uganda – is, of course, inexact. But it would be a misreading to ignore the parallels between the historical and its "fictionalised” representation, for such mappings, as the novel’s strategy for censuring with impunity, carry artistic import. The arbitrary discrepancy between the two levels of representation thus militates against the artistic merit of the novel and its capacity to illuminate Damibian (Ugandan) social structures. Similar to this is the selective representation that tells a deliberately incomplete story. For instance, the novel, in foregrounding Afro-Asian tensions, silences simmering ethnic tensions such as that between Kyeyune and Gombe-Kukwaya and which, if anything, were historically stronger. The implementation of the Common Man’s Charter, for one, targeted the feudalists (monarchists) more than capitalists (Asians) and abolition of kingdoms and the appropriation of their properties (as a strategy against feudalists) was more ruthless than the controlled nationalisation programmes (against the Asians). A more complex narrative of the events of this period would put in perspective the racial and ethnic tensions that characterise the immediate post-independence period, both of which result from the ideological pursuits of the Kyeyune/Obote I government in the name of decolonisation and nation-building.

Nazareth’s narrator, D’Souza, instead, amplifies the ideological bankruptcy of Damibia’s new political elite. Damibia’s independence movement, for him, "was mainly a revolution one shouted and drank one’s way into.” Excusing his own ineptitude on grounds of marginality – even though Nazareth himself, in contrasting him with Cota, suggests that it stems from the same “ideological bankruptcy” – D’Souza castigates Kyeyune for being so involved “in the immediate future” that he neglected “the distant future” (49). Echoing D’Souza, Wright identifies the greatest obstacle to Africa’s postcolonial progress and the failure of nation-building as the lack of any framing national ideology beyond the ousting of the colonialists. He contends:

[African nationalism was] primarily a struggle against colonialism, not a movement for or toward anything and its proponents had a better idea of what they wanted to remove than of what they wanted to replace it with. Few of the new leaders thought beyond the moment of independence to the kind of states they were creating or evolved any original ideas or directions for their construction. (7-8)

Drawing such inferences from D’Souza’s perspective results in a superficial reading, for Nazareth’s novel consciously strives to reveal the narrator’s unreliability. The novel suggests that D’Souza’s own corruptibility, ideological bankruptcy and sensuousness disqualify him from critiquing similar flaws in his political handlers. D’Souza believes that these flaws in himself emanate from the influence of Damibia’s unscrupulous political elite against whom he is powerless. His figure thus functions simply as part of the novel’s elaborate masking device, licensing the author to censure Damibia’s political system and inept political elite that produced and mentored him.

Nazareth represents Cota, not D’Souza, as his mouthpiece and model nationalist. Unsurprisingly, Cota’s assessment of Damibia’s politics differs significantly from D’Souza’s, stemming as it does from a down-to-earth politics which, contrary to the empty theorising that characterises the latter’s, engages with the lived, quotidian experiences of the dispossessed masses. Cota dismisses D’Souza, and with him the rest of the Damibian political elite, for having learned all his "left-wing talk from left-wing English country clubs!” D’Souza’s experience of society, Cota highlights, “is petty bourgeois Goan society" (Nazareth 67). The novel accounts for this anomaly in D’Souza in terms of his having been nurtured in Damibia, a protectorate, where anti-colonial nationalism is not as exacting as in a settler colony such as Azingwe. It is through Cota that Nazareth touches on the class dimension and socialist politics that define Afro-Asian relations in Damibia. Cota, nonetheless, remains a minor character in the novel and class politics and economic independence, as critical issues of the day, even though hinted at, remains largely unexplored. Cota also remains the only positive check on D’Souza’s incongruities. Thus, the novel reeks of ambiguities and reads as a rushed satirical project, owing to the unclear boundary between the narrator’s unreliability and the author’s own stance.

This slippage, for instance, manifests itself in the colonialist mindset with which D’Souza analyses Damibia’s postcolonial condition. The corruption and ineptitude that cripples Damibia bear racist overtones. It is not simply that D’Souza himself succumbs to the very vices for which he faults the political elite, while suspecting such flaws to be innately African, but that Nazareth himself seems unconscious of his narrator’s incongruities. This makes the novel read like a failed attempt at satirical excoriation. The model of Afro-Asian engagement envisioned in the post-colonial moment draws on the same stereotypical contrast between Africans and Goans/Asians that colonialism promoted. In keeping with the colonial logic that constructed Africans as people who are incapable of managing their own affairs, D’Souza diagnoses the problem with Damibian Civil Service as resulting from the departure of the European colonialists and, especially, their replacement by Africans. Unfortunately, the new bureaucrats “thought like the British or else they didn’t think at all”; the Goans, in contrast, “were faithful and efficient civil servants, but they merely executed policy and did not make it, and they were too few” (Nazareth 104). Implicit here is the need for the Goans to assume “the burden” that the colonialists have relinquished, thus nullifying the fact of political independence as most Goans still perceive Africans as a people incapable of self-determination.

The African political elite, for their part, are equally prejudiced against Goans/Asians, largely on historical grounds. Resorting to the same practice of racial stereotyping and homogenising – perfected under colonialism – to reinforce their anti-Goan rhetoric, anti-colonial nationalism is represented as ill-prepared to dismantle the racial prejudice established as an immutable colonial order. The process of nation-building fails to transcend the Afro-Asian racial divide and produce any far-reaching cross-racial engagement since whatever little attempt to that effect remains on the personal level. Asianness is perceived to be essentially anti-nationalism and full assimilation is the only terms on which diasporic subjects can be co-opted. Kyeyune presents *Yosefu* D’Souza to the people as “a brown man outside but he is all black inside”, one who is different from “his brothers, the *Muindis*, [who] have forgotten the cruelty of the White Man and now work with them to hurt us” (Nazareth 44). The brotherhood that is forged with D’Souza is anchored on Goa’s four hundred years of Portuguese colonial rule. Critics such as John Scheckter read Africanised tags such as “*Yosefu*”, “*Mugoa*” or “*Muindis*” as expressions of that “brotherhood.” While such tags, as Scheckter maintains, represent the inadequacy of Goanness or Indianness to explain Nazareth’s characters and as such regularise their “solid, visible presence in East Africa” (83), the failure of these new identities to attain any political significance is inescapable. Scheckter contends that such tags seek to strengthen Asians’ identification as Africans "by demolishing their own claims to exclusivity" (84). His argument ignores the fact that these tags are imposed by Africans and not necessarily claimed by the Goans/Asians themselves. As such, they are, rather, statements of Africans’ desire to undo Goan or Asian identities through assimilation.

In the novel, such assimilation initiatives or, at least, co-option into the cause of nationalism – and the ultimate project of inclusive post-colonial citizenship – fails, largely because neither Africans nor Goans/Asians are prepared to shake off the colonial hangover that shapes their perception of one another. Kyeyune’s brand of left-wing politics and populist manoeuvres, for instance, exacerbates mutual suspicion. He attacks not just systems but “the races and individuals who were part of those systems [….] He did not attack only Exploitation – he attacked *Asian* Exploiters. In the minds of most people […] Kyeyune was not condemning Exploitation but Asians" (Nazareth 25; emphasis added). Nazareth debunks the stereotype of Asians as an exploitative people, exclusively obsessed with commerce. But his endeavour is offset by a conscious effort in the novel to earmark a separate identity for Goans, apparently to extricate them from the larger Indian community.[[8]](#footnote-8) Both Kyeyune and D’Souza are instrumental in distancing the Goans from involvement in the economy and the attendant charge of exploitation by emphasising their specialty in the Civil Service.

For their part, most Asians take an anti-nationalist position, further complicating their relationship with Africans after political independence. Nationalist politics, as Thobhani points out, represents a threat to their privileged position (77). Thus, in joining it, D’Souza, while strengthening his relationship with the Africans, albeit in a limited way, alienates himself from his fellow Goans/Asians. D’Souza’s investment in the cause of nationalism thus seems insufficient to confer upon him the legitimacy he seeks. Towards the end of the novel, his closing farewell: "Goodbye, Mother Africa [...] Your bastard son loved you”, as his exile-bound plane takes off, underlines his illegitimacy (Nazareth 150); his self-reference as a “bastard”, as Scheckter observes, valorises filiation (83). In his absence, D’Souza becomes a liability to his people, his political pursuit having gone wrong. The Damibian political elite single him out “as a hammer to knock down other Asians” (Nazareth 153). His fallout with Damibia’s political elite emerges as a minor key in the failed attempt at assimilating Asians. It is a foretaste of the fate that would befall the Asians on the altar of political expedience. The accuracy with which Nazareth’s novel predicts both the coup against Kyeyune and the expulsion of the Asians emerges as one of its most redeeming features, its structural weaknesses notwithstanding. Part of Nazareth’s foresight is to imagine and project the exilic condition that produces the narrative even though the actual writing takes place in Uganda.

*The Gunny Sack*, like *In a Brown Mantle*, highlights the colonial underpinnings of Afro-Asian engagements. Besides the complicity of Asians in colonialism, the novel constructs strong diasporic networks as one other set of factors that complicate these engagements. As in Nazareth’s novel, the resultant social insularity of Asians augments their perception as an alien presence in East Africa. The novel structures the engagements between Asians and Africans dialectically as manifest in the predispositions of the three female characters – Ji Bai (born in India), Kulsum (intermediate) and Amina (an African) – around whom the three parts of the narrative are organised. The use of these three figures as pegs around which Asian experiences are chronicled is significant, for as Vassanji himself observes in an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, women in Indian communities are entrusted the custodianship and transmission of customs, values and traditions that define Indianness (26). The movement from Ji Bai, Kulsum to Amina represents a search for a workable model of Afro-Asian relationship, if not inter-racial harmony, and even though this end proves elusive, the novel suggests alternative modes of relationship and hints at future possibilities. As an African woman, Amina’s placement at the end of this dialectical structure signals the novel’s gesture towards some form of synthesis. Vassanji observes in the interview: “By the time the novel ends, a relationship might have been possible, but then it is too late because the narrator is already committed to someone else in a very Indian way [….] So he develops a new relationship with Amina, which is very close but cannot be consummated" (26). The lost possibilities emerge as a critique of the circumstances that defeat the relationship and inflexibility of the two communities.

The Dhanji-Taratibu coupling that activates prospects of a positive Afro-Asian engagement functions as the thesis. The novel hints at the prevalence of miscegenation on the coast – and, with it, prospects of hybridity – in the early phase of inter-racial contact in the western Indian Ocean world. But this trend is quickly arrested by the consolidation of diasporic links between the coast and the subcontinent, as increase in miscegenation attracts stringent intervention from the subcontinent aimed at keeping the community in line. Lamenting this interrupted process of integration, Salim muses whether the world would have been different had this trend continued – “if there had been more Husenis”, and if they “had grown up unhindered, playing barefoot… clutching Arabic readers” (Vassanji 11). The novel represents diasporic pressures exerted from the subcontinent as having disruptive influence on the cultural processes evolving in the western Indian Ocean region. Colonialism interferes with the process, as Ghosh contends, not only by galvanising diasporic presence in the region but also but also by violently enforcing racial separation.

Vassanji’s novel invents its own mode of nostalgic indulgence in the form of a concerted search for a disappeared figure, Huseni, embodying a world that has ceased to exist. Huseni’s disappearance generates much of the narrative material. Preceding the disappearance, the diasporic pressures that separate Huseni’s parents are reproduced in his father’s own attempt to sever ties between the son and his African mother. Where Dhanji succumbs to community pressure, Huseni rebels and disappears from home. Dhanji’s protracted search for Huseni is later reproduced in the form of Salim’s search for the past world of his mixed-race father. Unlike Dhanji’s efforts that ultimately cost him his life, Salim’s reconnects him to his family. For Dhanji, the search for Huseni represents his attempt to reconnect to that part of himself that he has surrendered to Africa, while for Salim it represents his attempt at reconnection with the African part of his heritage. Huseni thus emerges as a symbolic figure in the novel. Like Samsher and Nanziri’s mixed-race son in Tejani’s *Day After Tomorrow*, Huseni is markedly idealised as a celebration of inter-racial union. Vassanji represents him as a “beautiful” product of inter-racial union, “with virtues of both races and the prejudices of neither" (185).

In the novel, the threat of erasure that attends the African part of Dhanji’s family is compensated by Ji Bai’s commitment to that memory. As the figure that bridges the present and the past and through whom memories of the lost African connection are mediated, Ji Bai, beyond Wright’s estimation of her as crucial to the novel more at a symbolic level than for her dramatic presence (129), serves strong structural, even dramatic, significance. Her apparent marginality conceals her role as the indispensable bridge between the diegetic and metadiegetic narrative levels. As an implied metadiegetic narrator, Ji Bai’s presence is eclipsed only by the liberty with which Salim exercises what the French narratologist, Gérard Genette, in his exploration of a narrator’s functions, terms the “testimonial function” (255).[[9]](#footnote-9) The centrality of Ji Bai is commensurate with that of the gunny sack. Where the latter operates at the literal level, preserving vestiges of the Dhanjis’ irretrievable past, Ji Bai does so metaphorically as the wellspring of memory. The novel’s commitment to preserving the Dhanjis’ African connection as a living memory and perhaps actualising the possibilities it holds manifests itself in the continuities from Ji Bai to Salim, establishing the latter simultaneously as the heir to the gunny sack and the memory that it embodies. Thus, unlike his brother, Sona, who evinces stronger attachment to his Indianness, Salim directs his preoccupation towards the African part of his heritage, for his Indianness, as Vassanji observes in the interview with Kanaganayakam is one already "transformed by the Africanness” (21).

Within the framework of the novel’s dialecticism, if Ji Bai functions as the thesis in the establishment of Afro-Asian connection, Salim’s mother, Kulsum, does so as the antithesis. She evinces strong prejudice against Africa, conveniently oblivious of Juma’s pedigree, having been married to him in Mombasa where he has relocated and effectively been cut off from his family after a series of vicissitudes. Following Juma’s death, Kulsum relocates to Dar-es-Salaam with her children. Her anti-African sentiments are at odds with the post-independence nationalist fervour and the call for racial equality by Tanzania’s political elite. Kulsum’s antagonism towards Salim’s orientation towards Africa knows no bounds. In her contempt towards the liaison between Salim and Amina, Kulsum eyes her son suspiciously each time he returns home as if he "had come with hands soiled by the vilest deed” so has to be purified (Vassanji 229). Similarly, Kulsum is determined to shut out the world that Ji Bai opens up to Salim. Preoccupied with the marriage prospects for her two pubescent girls, Kulsum regards the past revealed by Ji Bai, with its “stories of black ancestry”, as an inconveniencing one, one that could “bring the mercury of social standing racing down to unacceptable levels” (Vassanji 149-50). While she exists in her own right as a fully realised individual, Kulsum epitomises the reactionary tendencies of the diaspora, which undermines Asians’ negotiation of belonging.

Against Ji Bai’s and Kulsum’s competing orientations, Amina emerges as a figure of compromise, of negotiated engagements, if not of hope. As the most complex of the three female figures, she resists any simple description. At their first encounter at the national service camp, Amina’s assessment of Salim is informed by common anti-Asian stereotype but her receptiveness enables him to present a self-redemptive image, resulting in a relationship based on mutual acceptance. She comes to acknowledge imprints of Asiananess on the cultural landscape of East Africa, especially with respect to cuisine practices and furnishing culture. Amina affirms the Africanness of Indians, pointing at their centuries of presence on the coast (Vassanji 245). Her change of attitude results from the positive influence of her relationship with Salim. Despite their mutual acceptance of one another, however, their relationship becomes more secret as their return to the city after leaving the camp involves being subjected to the prejudices of their respective cultures. Both Salim and Amina later end up as exiles in the United States, away from their constricting communities. The novel ends with a suggestion of future possibilities, not for the two former lovers – as Salim is already trapped in an unhappy marriage – but for his daughter, also named Amina. In his final address to the younger Amina, Salim alludes to “wounded selves” and “wounded dreams” from which “flowers still grow”, closing:

We had our dreams, Little One, we dreamt the world, which was large and beautiful and exciting, and it came to us this world, even though it was more than we bargained for, it came in large soaking waves and wrecked us, but we are thankful, for to have dreamt was enough. And so, dream, Little Flower…. (269)

Where the nation and the old diaspora defeat the young lovers’ dream both of a blissful union and a tolerant nation, the new diaspora is represented as full of possibilities. The younger Amina emerges as a figure of hope, signalled by both her metonymic relation to her father’s first love and the metaphoric significance of “Flower” that grows from the wounded “selves” and "dreams."

As with Nazareth, Vassanji’s relation to the narrative is quite complex. The Govindjis are split into those who evince strong orientation towards colonial Britain, the subcontinent or East Africa. Dhanji himself is split between his sympathy for the cause of Tanganyikan nationalism and his admiration of, and gratitude to, the British colonialists. In contrast, his grandson, Juma, is not only oriented towards the British colonialists but decidedly anti-nationalist. The complexity of his characters’ orientations, however, does not spare Vassanji from criticism of selective memory. Amin notes, for instance, that whereas Vassanji’s narrator makes no secret of the harshness of the short-lived German colonialism in Tanganyika, there are scant references of the atrocities of British colonialism. This becomes even more significant for a novel that portrays, or at least hints at, the harshness of the Mau Mau. Amin highlights the narrator’s preoccupation with the corruption and inefficiency of the post-independence political elite and the racial conflicts between the Africans and the Asians. It is not as though Vassanji chooses to steer clear of overtly political subjects. In fact, he is as political as a writer can be. As a further instance of his "glossing over”, Amin draws attention to how carefully the narrator chronicles the racially-motivated carnage that the 1964 Zanzibar revolution leaves in its wake (10). Against this conspicuous silence on the brutality of British colonialists, one may argue that Vassanji’s is no master narrative and the author is chronicling only one of the many versions of Tanzania’s history, the Asian one. Still, one is left grappling with how to make sense of the author’s softness towards the British colonialists.

**Conclusion**

*In a Brown Mantle* and *The Gunny Sack* show that diasporic orientation, rather than mitigating Asians’ unhomley conditions does more to exacerbate them, thereby complicating negotiations of belonging in the post-independence moment. In the two novels, the diasporic subjects inscribe their marginality by situating themselves uneasily between the British colonialists and Africans and, in the post-independence period, between their respective diasporic communities and African cultures that seek to assimilate them. In the post-independence dispensation, the politics that Asians espouse is contingent upon how they define their destiny and negotiate their affiliations. As one of the motivating factors behind the two novels, questions of belonging and citizenship are shown to drive a wedge between Asians and Africa. Both Nazareth and Vassanji, however, evince keen awareness of the point highlighted by Godwin Siundu, that invoking history does more to undermine than strengthen Asians’ claim on East African countries as home. Siundu accounts for this difficulty in terms of Asians’ association with and complicity in British colonialism in the region, on the one hand, and the autochthonous claims of home, made, especially, by the political elite in the post-independence period, on the other (15). Nazareth and Vassanji’s novels, without denying this problematic association, seek to complicate Asians’ contribution to the process of nation-building in the region, including their often-overlooked participation in anti-colonial politics, as a basis upon which to claim belonging in the post-independence dispensation.

For both Nazareth and Vassanji, however, attempts to highlight Asians contribution to anti-colonial nationalism and nation-building repeatedly return to the tensions generated by the contending aspirations of Africans and Asians, which, coupled with burdens of history that the latter carry, galvanises strong waves of Asian exodus in the late 1960s and early 1970, culminating in the 1972 expulsion in Uganda. In the two novels – Nazareth’s more so than Vassanji’s – Asians’ victimisation in the wake of the immediate post-independence nationalist fervour stems less from popular perception against them as the most prominent vestiges of imperialism than from their failure to adjust to the demands of post-independence dispensation. In the climate of the ideological jostling of the late 1960s and the pressure to actualise the full meaning of independence, Asians emerge as the most convenient scapegoat the new political elite. The resultant exodus, while signalling Asians’ failure to assert belonging, opens new possibilities that had been stifled by East African nations and the old diasporas. Vassanji, however, departs from this rather reductive racialisation of victimhood to show that post-independence political violence is symptomatic of the wider betrayal of political ideals of the new dispensation.

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1. Africanisation programmes, couched in the registers of decolonisation, galvanises the first major waves of emigration from all the three East African countries in the late 1960s, culminating in the 1972 expulsion of Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin. Although Africanisation resonates mostly with the Ugandan context, I use the term loosely to capture the ideological pursuits by both Julius Nyerere’s government articulated in the Arusha Declaration (1967) and A. M. Obote’s in the Common Man’s Charter (1969). Although Kenya itself was not directly impacted by these ideologies, Asian Kenyans responded in similar ways, largely out of fear that they too could be subjected to a similar backlash as their Ugandan counterparts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vassanji, like Nazareth, also foregrounds the fictional nature of his novel, despite – or even because of – traceable autobiographical elements in the work. A third-generation Indian on one side and fourth generation on the other, Vassanji, like his characters, lived in both Kenya and Tanzania before migrating to the west. See "Life at the Margins” (Vassanji 119). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A similar motif runs through Vassanji’s 1999 novel, *Amriika*, where Ramji, the narrator, at the beginning of the novel, recalls that his ancestors were instructed to await the final avatar of their god, Vishnu, whose arrival, as in *The Gunny Sack*, would be heralded by the sun rising from the west. The novel is similarly preoccupied with locating the west. Ramji observes: "My people sought it first in Africa, an ocean away, where they settled …. But in time this west moved further, and became – America; or, as Grandma said it: Amriika" (*Amriika* 3). The mythical element in the apparatus of memory is also attended by material considerations, transforming this religious quest into an economic one. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Both documents identifyfeudalism and capitalism as twin evils that endanger the new nation. To isolate them, the Tanzania under its ruling party, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), restricted its membership to peasants and workers. Similarly, the register of the *Charter*, passed by Uganda’s ruling party, the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC), hinges on the notion of the "common man”, preventing effectively, as stated in article 3, "any one person or group of persons from being masters of all or a section of the people of Uganda and to ensure that all citizens of Uganda become truly masters of their own destiny." The two documents deal with slightly different political threats. In Tanzania, which is already a republic at the time, the threat is primarily from capitalists; in Uganda, it is from both feudalists and capitalists, though the former present a more urgent threat as the passing of the *Charter* follows the 1966 Kabaka Crisis – the first coup d’état that deposes the country’s first ceremonial president (also the Kabaka of Buganda) and ushers in Republicanism after the abolition of monarchies – and the subsequent promulgation of the 1967 Republican Constitution. In both countries, the capitalists are predominantly Asians. In Uganda more so than in Tanzania, the rhetorical force of the “common man”, defined primarily against the feudalist, rests in its capacity to conflate the feudalists and the capitalists as enemies of the new state. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The spirit of Bandung, as articulated by Indonesia’s president, Ahmed Sukarno, sprang from an awareness of the diversity of the twenty-nine newly independent Afro-Asian countries in attendance and their transnational unity against imperialism. "Conflict”, Sukarno warns, “comes not from a variety of skins, nor from a variety of religions… but from a variety of desires [….] We are united by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it appears. We are united by a common detestation of racialism. And we are united by a common determination to preserve and stabilize peace in the world” (Prashad 33-4). Ghosh, along similar lines, suggests that this unity was at the heart of the “interrupted cosmopolitanism” and that reclaiming it represents the attempt by Third World anti-colonial nationalism to create a universalism of their own (37). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Asian exodus in the late 1960s, though stemming from Asians’ great displeasure with the upsurge of Africanisation politics of the period, is largely voluntary. Cases such as D’Souza’s are exceptions other than the rule. The 1972 “exodus”, which I explore in the course of the chapter, marks a significant shift, both in magnitude and initiative, as voluntary departure is substituted by expulsion in the endeavours to resolve “unhomely” and "alien" presence in the country. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Asians’ insularity is an effect of diasporisation, which steadily reverses earlier cases of miscegenation. Transgressive liaisons such as that between Salim and Amina, an African girl, attracts a lot of antagonism and, as such, has to be kept secret as in the case of Kulsum (Salim’s mother) and her employee, Edward. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Both Nazareth and Vassanji hint at the internal division that exist among the Asian East African communities through their exclusivist nature of their respective communities, the Goans and the Shamsis. Akbarali H. Thobhani, a Ugandan Ismaili, in a review essay, highlights the discriminatory tendencies among the different Asian communities and the different manner of their interaction with Africans, noting that such differences, however, did not stop the Africans from treating them as a homogeneous group (78). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For details, see Genette’s analysis of *voice* as the third element in the *verbal* aspect of the narrative. The verbal, for Genette, defines properties that govern the shift from narrative discourse (*recit*) to *story* (255-56). Genette conceptualises the testimonial function – alternatively termed, “function of attestation” – as homologous to Roman Jakobson’s “emotive” function. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)