

The Burden of Proof: Negotiating Belonging-Disjuncture for Survival in Selected Fiction of East African Asians

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the efforts made by the East African Asians to assert their presence, as a way of negotiating their transnational identity in the region, despite the perceived differences with the native Africans concerning citizenship. Using selected Asian texts, I examine the negotiation of a hospitable space in the region by the East African Asian community through participation in various development activities in the region. The paper concludes that the aspirations of Asians to a sense of belonging within the East African context is characterized by a sense of ambivalence. They simultaneously nurture cosmopolitan visions as well as a desire for difference. The result of this is a community at crossroads and for whom full-scale integration remains a dream more than a century after settlement within the region.

Key Words

Genealogy, cosmopolitanism, disjuncture, identity, belonging, home, afropolitanism

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I. Introduction

In spite of their being regarded as a minority community, the East African Asians have survived by situating themselves strategically in their countries of migration. They have worked hard towards establishing themselves as a formidable group in the region. This is part of the process of re-membering and remembering cultural identities that had been dismembered by anti-colonial and postcolonial forces (Makokha, 2016). The process has been made possible by their forging an Afropolitan identity. Mbembe (2006) describes Afropolitanism as:

Awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, the ability to recognize one's face in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seems opposites-it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that underlines the term *Afropolitanism*. (67)

According to Mbembe therefore, there is no such thing as 'African authenticity' in a continent that is connected both physically and historically to the rest of the world. This is the kind of identity that the East African Asians forge through social, cultural and literary production in order to survive in the region during this era of globalization.

The denial by native Africans that the East African Asians are fellow citizens on the one hand contributes to their sense of placelessness and interstitiality, but on the other hand, gives them more strength, as it strategically places the East African Asians more as global citizens as opposed to being local. Their work, in the opinion of Makokha (2016) transgress and transcend national spaces of narration once privileged by the earlier generation of writers such as Achebe and Ngugi. As Makokha puts it, the protagonists in these works are always the exiled, the displaced, the traveler and the migrants whose cross-border tendencies, various travels, and/or heritage of dislocation/ migration bequeath them as a congenital cosmopolitan bent of mind.

The global aspect of belonging enables the Asians to move freely as they interact and transact business with the rest of the world. Siundu (2009) also avers that East African Asians enjoy privileges such as economic dominance because of their touch with histories of the region, contemporary geopolitics and the thinning of boundaries that have allowed them to formulate multiple consciousness in the construction of their identities. He regards the study as an example of how immigration can be advantageous as it places the subjects in a better place than what the home offers. However, in as much as the East African Asians devise their survival

mechanisms, their literature persistently suggests a sense of insecurity and anxiety while in the host countries as depicted by the Asian characters in their literary texts.

The economic establishment of the East African Asians in the region cannot be ignored. Backed by a history of business from the first generation of Asians in East Africa, the community has done a lot to assert its presence in the host nations. Their dominant role in the economy of East Africa was triggered by the fact that, their security depended on their ability to “negotiate mutual economic interests with rulers.” (Oonk, 2010). Since the colonial era of *Dukawallas*, the East African Asians have grown and expended their business empires having established vast companies and industries. They have invested a lot of money on charities, education, temples, mosques, hospitals and media among many other sectors. This demonstrates the formation of an Afropolitan identity by the community through such investments with the hope that they could now be accepted as part of the East African citizenry.

Intellectually, the East African Asians have also played a critical role in the development of East Africa. At one point, Naipul (1978) accused the East African Asian community of ‘near total absence of imagination’ in literary production on their part as a result of too much concentration on business. Naipul’s comment came as an emphasis on the earlier observation by Lo Liyong (1965) about the literary barrenness of East Africa. While urging his fellow East Africans to be aware and overcome it, Liyong had specifically singled out the East African Asians, “Our citizens of Asian origin have been taking more care of family businesses than engaging in literary works,” (34). He further challenged community and religious leaders like Aga Khan to contribute in fostering a cultural renaissance in East Africa. (Desai, 211). There was a renaissance in Asian literary works which started emerging in the nineteen sixties hence forth.

The emergency of literary production did not kill the knack for business entrepreneurship among the East African Asians. On the contrary it is the same business that was earlier used to promote literariness within the community, with religious leaders and entrepreneurs such as Aga Khan and Kalidas Mehta respectively contributing towards the establishment of a National Cultural Centre in Kampala, holding a ‘national theatre, a language hall, and many other offices for promotion of a variety of arts including film production.’ (Gregory, 2011).

Since then, the East African Asians have made milestones in business establishment in the region. Although, Oonk (2010) argues that despite running the business empires for decades in East Africa and helping to establish the region as a business hub, the East African Asians realize that their effort is never enough for them to be accepted as locals. That they are still regarded as strangers. This is also what Mamdani (1998) earlier asserted when commenting that a settler will never become a native from the point of view of ethnic citizenship. This attitude could have informed the expulsion of Asians from Uganda in the 1970s by the Amin regime. The community had dominated the commercial sector in the country for decades, providing skilled labour, capital and entrepreneurship (Waliaula, 2012). As a result, they reaped resentment from the native Africans who felt that they were being re-colonized and therefore needed ‘economic liberation’ (Jamal, 1976). This resentment culminated in expulsion order by the Ugandan president to all Asians in Uganda, as the first phase towards economic liberation. The second phase was the allocation of Asian businesses to Africans (p.602). As satirically suggested by Jamal, these rewards reaped by the Asians in Uganda included resentment from Africans.

However, in this paper I argue that, in spite of the previous longstanding ambivalent relations between the native Africans and the East African Asians, there has been remarkable gradual improvement in attitude evidenced by the inclusion of the community in issues of national development.

Contrary to Maganda (2012) who observes that the Asian community’s political participation in Kenya has been steadily going down despite having an outstanding history of political involvement, I argue that their participation has indeed increased. The appointment, election and active participation of the Asians in political affairs of the country points to the fact that the community has started negotiating towards citizenship and belonging in the East African region.

Construction of East African Asians as Provisional Citizens

The question of citizenship is the most crucial issue revolving around the identity of East African Asians. Kahyana (2014), interprets the portrayal of citizenship in East African Asian writing from two perspectives; with the first being the possession of a passport. This is derived from the libertarian conception which views citizenship as legal status and further attempts to give individuals as much freedom as possible based on self-interest.

For a long time since immigration to East Africa, the Asians have been compelled to acquire identification documents in the form of passports in order to claim citizenship within the region. This allows them to move freely across territorial boundaries, both locally and internationally. Thus, citizenship becomes defined by ownership of the book, which is a legal requirement by the state. The Asian community adopts this libertarian conception of citizenship as a result of their interest in trade in the region, since their main concern was the security of their families, business and savings (Vassanji 1989; 52). For instance, in Verjee’s *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall*, when Leena arrives in Kenya from London, the first thing she is asked to

produce at the immigrations department before being allowed to proceed, is the passport. This document serves as proof of citizenship in the host country.

When she is robbed by street boys in Nairobi City, Leena goes to report the case to the police station, where she is asked for an identification document such as identity card or passport. When she denies, the police officer replies, "I need to verify your person. Unless you have another way." (38). The other way being referred to here is bribery. When Leena fails to cooperate, the officer tells her that she can do nothing about her situation unless she brings her identification documents, "Come back with your passport and make sure you are quick, quick. In the afternoon we are always busy." (39). The statement is meant to make Leena vulnerable and so, plead with the officer to serve her right away, instead of waiting for the afternoon, and the only way to do so would be to give a bribe in exchange for the service.

The second perspective on citizenship is emphasis on the social participation in public and community affairs. It demands that the individual citizen contributes to the common good of his/her community (3). The Communitarian conception of citizenship (Voet, 1998: 10) appeals to the native Africans who demand to see Asians actively participating in the social, economic and political development of the post-colonial states of East Africa. This involves joining in the struggle for independence, racial tolerance and social inclusivity; and fairness in trade (4). For instance, D'Souza and Cota in Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle*, play a critical role in the fight for the independence of Damibia. The two activists move all over the country, convincing fellow Asians to join native Africans in the fight against colonialism. The passion and determination with which these Asians participate in political agitation, proves their claim of belonging to the region as citizens.

In Verjee's *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall*, there are people like Pinto, who participate whole heartedly in the in the fight against colonialism in their host country. Pinto, "returned from India to become involved in the local movement here, even supplied them with weapons. And in the middle of the night, he would put up political posters throughout the city, looking like a superhero. No one could catch him." (70). The daring move by Pinto to fight colonialism in Kenya, despite having an Asian genealogy, emphasizes on the issue of cosmopolitanism among the East African Asians, which makes them feel like natives inspite of the geographical location.

Asian Identity and the 'Duka' Ideology

The Asians in East Africa are known for their entrepreneurial skills right from the ancient days during the construction of the Kenya-Uganda Railway. The *duka* (Kiswahili term for shop) is seen as the contact point between the Asian and the African inspite of their differences. The East African Asian choses to engage in business as a way of integrating within the African society. Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*, introduces the reader to a small village in East Africa, surrounded by Asian shops selling clothes, beads, sandals and blankets. Samsher, the protagonist, is also introduced as a boy who, "knew that his job was to run a shop. He had never been told this. His younger brother and two sisters who were older than he, all knew this, without being told about it. The Indians had come to Africa to trade and even the smallest child knew as it grew up that life centered around the shop and the peasants." (6). This description outlines clearly the Asian vision in East Africa, as revealed to the young generation. The children grow up observing their parents dedicatedly engage in their everyday activities at the shop where they too could often help.

The entrepreneurial skills are depicted when the African peasants come to sell their harvest to the Asian traders in form of, "grain and fresh vegetables loaded in loose jute bundles on their heads," (14). In return, the Asian traders also sell to the peasants, clothes, farm and household items. This trade therefore, provides an avenue for interaction between Asians and the native Africans, hence reducing misconceptions and prejudices between the two communities.

Through their long experience in business engagements, the East African Asians perfect the art of bargaining. As Mohemedali confesses, "The instinct for bargaining had so worked itself among the forefathers of his family that it was synonymous with the instinct of self-preservation. A persistent, almost fanatically religious impulse, arising out of poverty and deprivation." (8). The expression shows how seasoned the East African Asians are in matters to do with trade. Therefore, Mohemedali sees the sole responsibility he has in teaching his children the art of business, being a *Wepari* himself.

In Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vikram's grandfather choses to settle in Nakuru and start business. As a result, his children and grandchildren were born and grew up in the region engaging in wholesale and retail businesses. For instance, Juma Molabux did not go back to Asia after his indentureship with the railway, "He chose to settle in Kijabe, where he opened a store to sell blankets, beads and copper wire to the Masai." (41).

Juma Molabux, is introduced in the text as the only merchant engaging in wine business in the whole country, supplying even to the whites. As such, he is very influential and known to the colonial government. When his son Sayeed is mistakenly beaten and injured by the police during one of their raids on Mau Mau sympathizers, the government through the District Commissioner and the Commissioner of Police has to

apologize to Molabux, and also assure him that the officers in charge of the raid have been reprimanded accordingly.

The East African Asians' involvement in business enterprise is also witnessed in Dawood's *Eye of the Storm*. Whenever he was taken to Nyeri town for shopping by his father Gitau, young Njoroge would be fascinated by Mr. Patel who spent all his time in the shop serving customers, and receiving a lot of money from them. Njoroge nurses fond memories of Mr. Patel because of his generosity towards him, "On the days when Patel was doing a roaring business, he would smile at the little boy and press a shilling into his open hand. Sometimes he would give him a packet of sweets." (Dawood, 21). The industriousness and generosity of Patel forms part of Njoroge's childhood memories. When he later matures and becomes a surgeon, he still remembers the Asian businessman who comes for treatment in his hospital. As a result, Njoroge works on Patel meticulously until he gets healed of the prostate disease.

The East African Asians are perceived to be good at mathematics because of their involvement in business ventures. Therefore, wherever they are involved in development matters, their business acumen is given priority. Like Mr. Sheth in Dawood's *Eye of the Storm* is appointed in the Board of United Kenya Hospital because of being Asian,

"There seemed to be a popular notion that people of Indian sub-continent were good at figures. Mr. Sheth had ample opportunity to prove it when the financial director presented the monthly incomes. While some Board members brought their calculators from their pockets, Mr. Sheth showed that he could do the sums off the top of his head and produce the correct results before the members had even finished feeding the data into their personal gadgets! The other merit attributed to the community was good husbandry and sound house-keeping sense. Mr. Sheth had been elected the chairman of the Finance sub-committee and was given the difficult task of keeping the books in the black, and under his stewardship, they were rarely in the red. (Dawood, 7).

The above statement explains the perception of native Africans towards the East African Asians concerning their accuracy with numbers as a result of their involvement in entrepreneurship. With the presence of Mr. Sheth as Chair of the Finance sub-committee, the entire Board of United Kenya Hospital, was convinced that their financial issues were in safe hands.

The Asians' entrepreneurial acumen can also be attributed to their industriousness. For instance, apart from Mr. Sheth being on the Board of United Kenya Hospital, there is Miss Ayesha, who also is appointed the Matron of the hospital. Despite being an Asian, Ayesha works hard in the hospital and turns out being one of the best workers in the institution. However, it is Dr. Njoroge's sexual advances that seem to interfere with her smooth working. She refuses to give in, insisting that she already has a fiancé given to her by the parents, according to the Asian culture.

The East African Asian industry is also witnessed in the development of successful businesses. For instance, in Verjee's *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall*, when Leena arrives from the university in London, she is first served tea with Manji biscuits. The tea is local beverage while the biscuits are manufactured by the House of Manji, an industry belonging to Mr. Manji, who is an Asian merchant based in Nairobi.

Political Contestations of the Nation-State

The East African Asians have been actively involved in the political affairs of the host countries. This is through convincing their community to support the African leaders and participate in the fight for independence. Although some of the East African Asians find themselves in a tight situation after independence, due to the collaborative role they played with the colonialists. The colonial government had put them in between the Africans and the whites, with the main purpose being to, "put into effect colonial policies resented by the Africans." (Ocaya-Lakidi, 90), which they did so well. As things were initially, the Asians had enjoyed the goodwill of the colonial government, when the Africans were suffering. They never imagined a native African would one day rule himself. Having joined the Whites to undermine and exploit the natives, the Asians are faced with embarrassment and shame mixed with fear, when the Africans take over leadership.

Later on, the Asians serve as politicians, enjoying a close relationship with the government of the day. However, in the postcolonial state, they have been accused of always collaborating with the government of the day as a strategy of survival. This could be the reason why few East African Asians are visible in opposition politics within the region.

The Asian political influence in East Africa, whether directly or indirectly, legally or otherwise, is therefore way above their numbers and above other communities. The Asian characters in the selected texts actively engage and are dedicated in the liberation of East Africa from colonial rule.

The Asians view themselves as Africans since they have been born and grown in East Africa. D'Souza insists when cornered by Gombe-Kukwaya (the Minister for Interior and Defence Matters) after he attempts to complain about his (Gombe's) corrupt deals that earn him two taxis and two houses,

"Where are you from, Mr., Mr –"

"D'Souza."

"What country are you from?"

“This country, Damibia.”

“I mean your real country – your country of origin.”

“I was born here. I was even conceived here.”

“D’Souza, eh? You must be from Goa. When do you propose going back?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I am a citizen of this country.”

“We are fighting for our Independence here. Don’t you think you should go back to fight for your country and win independence for it?” (Nazareth, 75)

Gombe –Kukwaya’s attitude towards D’Souza threatens his hopes of enjoying the freedom that he contributed in fighting for in Damibia. D’Souza is one of the East African Asians that have high hopes for their country, having known no other country except Damibia. But the response he gets from the politician, creates fear in him, forcing him, for a moment, to question his identity. D’Souza however, still stands firm and challenges him, “I will go to Goa the day you go back to Congo. And the day all immigrant tribes in Africa move back to where they came from” (Nazareth, 75). The statement shows how native leaders conveniently use issues of nationality to intimidate members of the Asian community who dare question their authority. The perception of impermanence of the Asians in terms of citizenship is clearly evident here. For some locals, it does not matter how long the Asians have lived in East Africa, they will simply never belong, and their home will always be elsewhere.

The issue of misappropriation of public resources and engaging in corrupt deals is not only associated with the new regime of native Africans alone, but also the East African Asians who get positions in the new government. D’Souza in *In a Brown Mantle*, involves himself in corrupt deals, and after making a lot of money, flees to London in exile for fear of being eliminated by the very regime he was working for. This illustrates how the East African Asians also negotiate belonging in the region by participating in corrupt practices together with the natives, which indicates that they have lived in the region long enough to understand how the system works.

Cota is not as lucky as D’Souza who escapes to exile. Despite playing an active role in the fight for the independence of Azingwe, Cota gets in trouble with the new regime after it fails to reward those who contributed to its ascension to power, including himself, and also when he attempts to correct them for their immoral behavior and greed. Consequently, he ends up being branded a ‘bloody mugoa’ and a ‘pain in the neck’ before being ruthlessly assassinated by the same regime he worked hard to bring in power.

In Vassanji’s *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vikram grows up in a politically charged environment surrounding Kenya and Tanzania. The story opens in 1953, a time when the East African countries are struggling for independence from the, “colonial world of repressive, undignified subjecthood.” (5).

Mahesh Uncle, is another Asian who is so deeply involved in the politics of East Africa, that he is referred to by the family as a communist. As put by Ocita (2013) his support for the independence of Kenya is so intense that it makes his family nervous, because of the repercussions from the colonial government should it become aware. Having an experience in India’s fight for independence, Mahesh feels strongly that Africa also needs freedom. He even goes ahead to write a very long letter to the Indian High Commissioner Appa Pant, explaining why independence is a good thing for Africans, “He said India should give recognition to Mau Mau and assist them.” (Vassanji, 213). This controversial letter lands Mahesh in trouble with the colonial government, which put him on the suspect list.

Verjee’s *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall* also mentions the political role played by Asians in East Africa. When still young in the 1950s, Raj meets Pinto, an Asian freedom fighter who is famous in the whole region for his role in the fight for the independence of Kenya. Raj’s uncle Dilip describes Pinto as a brave man who, “returned from India to become involved in the local movement here, even supplied them with weapons. And in the middle of the night, he would put up political posters throughout the city, moving like a superhero. No one would catch him.” (70). This explains the determination of Pinto to see that Kenya is free from colonial slavery. He passionately fights to see Kenyatta freed, as well as ensure, “the KANU victory in the 1961 elections.” (70). This kind of passion could only be manifested in a person who believed he belonged to the region. Pinto therefore, regards himself as a citizen of Kenya who rightly deserves to participate in the affairs of his country.

Cosmopolitanism as Top Life for the ‘Nowhere’ Men

Having migrated and settled in the region, the East African Asians have to devise ways of survival and enjoying life in the new space they call ‘home’. The young Asian generation seems to take life liberally by freely mingling with natives without giving much attention to their race or strong cultural beliefs. They go as far as engaging in many social activities with them without much precaution. As argued by Saha (2010)

“The world as a global village facilitates the feeling of being at home in the cosmopolitan urban quarters of the world. It is in these situations that the external circumstances of displacement become of less importance and the internal circumstances, that is the psychological and spiritual condition of the mind, gain prominence. Despite being in a diaspora there is little consolation of any hope of escape into any pre-exilic state.” (1)

This statement reinforces the conducive environment provided by urban areas in the region, which encourages the East African Asians, especially the young generation who were born there, to interact freely with other races with burdening themselves with racial attitudes. The community views itself to be at home, carrying on with its activities without fear or anxiety of any form of discrimination or deportation from occupied spaces.

For instance, Mohemedali in Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow* moves into a two-roomed house above the Blue Room hotel in the city of Kampala, which is full of young Asians who engage in social activities like drinking, smoking and debauchery,

"the place had become the centre or meeting place for pimps, prostitutes and drunk Indian debauchees, tired of trade or religion. They flirted with the barmaids and African women, who worked as tailors, sweepers and seamstresses in the shops around the hotel all day long." (Tejani, 34). This describes a generation that is tired of being branded 'visitors' but now freely interacts and engages in social activities just like the natives.

Samsher occasionally escapes from his father's shop to go and watch football matches with his brother at the Nakivuko Stadium. While in the stadium, he is fascinated by the Baganda culture especially the women, "He was captivated by the graceful movement of the muganda female. Her elegant dress that exaggerated her back-swing. The sharp delicate features and the glow of the fresh skin reminded him of the sun dying in a clash of hot sympathy for the earth." (35). This explains the cosmopolitan mindset in the young Asians who detach themselves from their strong racial and cultural cocoons, and become global citizens, appreciating the beauty of African culture. The attraction with Buganda culture is what later opens Samsher to his first puberty experience, "a fierce longing came into him, a yearning to be with such harmony. For the first time in his young malehood, watching the man and woman before him, now talking gently, their fingers intertwined and playing with each other, he woke up to his puberty." (36). Samsher is seen here as being cosmopolitan, such that he does not control his feelings because of the racial differences, but instead allows them to run wild into his world of utopia. These desires become actualized later in the text when Samsher gets into an affair with a Baganda woman, Nanziri, and eventually marries her. Samsher's experiences make him a real cosmopolitan since his marriage to Nanziri leads to a son, who is hybrid of Asian and African blood.

In Verjee's *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall*, Leena is received by her family in Nairobi on arrival from London with a banner written boldly WELCOME HOME LEENA. The banner communicates a message on the definition of home according to the East African Asians. They believe they belong to the region by naturalization, as for the first and second generation Asians like Kohli senior, Pooja and Raj, as well as birth for the third generation like Jai and Leena.

Relationships and Marriage

The East African Asians also negotiate their belonging in the region through their relationships and marriage with native Africans. These relationships within the region can be traced to the first generation Asians who came to the region as indentured labourers. After the completion of construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway, not all Asians return to their native countries. Some choose to stay in East Africa and engage in trade, as a way of negotiating their belonging to the region. As a result, they end up marrying and getting children in the region. Such are examples of Samsher's father, Mohemedali in Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*, who immigrated to East Africa from Bombay while still a young boy on a ship, and stayed on until he grew up and had his own family. Samsher's father owing to his close interaction with the locals through business, ends up marrying a native African woman and getting hybrid children. However, not many are open to the idea of cross-racial marriages, as nothing is mentioned about the families of the Asian businessmen, except that they are focused on teaching their children how to become entrepreneurs in future. The silence may indicate the feeling of reluctance with which the older generation of East African Asians approach the issue of integration, which contributes to the slow pace of realizing cosmopolitanism fully.

However, not many are open to the idea of cross-racial marriages, as nothing is mentioned about the families of the Asian businessmen, except that they are focused on teaching their children how to become entrepreneurs in future. The silence may indicate the feeling of reluctance with which the older generation of East African Asians approach the issue of integration, which contributes to the slow pace of realizing cosmopolitanism fully.

Despite tough rules and cultural beliefs surrounding the East African Asian community, there is a form of rebellion developed by, especially the third generation. These are young men and women who socialize and eventually enter into sexual relationships with the native Africans, being fully aware of the consequences. For instance, in Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*, Samsher develops a romantic relationship with Nanziri which culminates into marriage leading to a hybrid child, "A child plays in the verandah. He is the child of a new civilization. He is fair and brown like an Indian: but he has the bright teeth of the African and his curly hair. He is the life that has been forged from the union of parents of different races. The mother is African: the father is Indian." (Tejani, 6). Therefore, the child born from the marriage between Samsher and Nanziri is a true reflection of cosmopolitanism, a replica of Samsher's own life experience of being born by cross-racial parents.

In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Molabux stays alone in Kijabe, interacting mostly with the Masai who are his clients. The Masai men would tease him, if he was a real man, whose work was to just stare at their women. The pressure and loneliness became too much until he developed interest in their women, “He was lonely, he had no family in the country, and not much status, and he badly wanted a woman.” (Vassanji, 43). The emotional need surpasses the cultural boundaries, pushing Molabux to marry an African woman, who stays with him through the entire text. Although it is evident that Molabux married a Masai woman out of loneliness and desperation, one cannot ignore the significance of his audacity to surpass cultural boundaries, given the seriousness with which Asians abhorred Asia-African marriages.

Lall also has the same experience of feeling attracted to the native Africans as a result of his ancestry. Given that the grandfather had sired children with African women, Lall felt that he belonged to the region and was tied to the land both by birth and blood just like his friend Njoroge (Makokha, 2002). Therefore, according to Lall, “His fantasy has partly to do with his desperate need to belong to the land I (Lall) was born in,” (59). The statement describes Lall’s grandfather who settled in East Africa and developed a sense of belonging through marriage to the native Africans. His generation therefore, perceive themselves as Africans because of being born and raised in the region.

Vikram’s sister Deepa, also falls in love with their childhood native African friend, Njoroge. This relationship is so opposed by their racially sensitive parents, that it ends up tragically with the assassination of Njoroge. Deepa on her part, does not see any problem in falling in love with and eventually marrying Njoroge with whom they have grown together. To her, he is a normal man like any other, if anything, better than her own arranged Asian fiancé, with whom she has no emotional attachment. The attachment she has to Njoroge is so strong that, it makes her unable to enjoy her marriage life later on in the text. Njoroge earlier on writes a letter to Deepa which highlights their shared humanity, “The most wonderful thing about us is that we have learned, we’ve discovered a new terrain in human relationship, a new trait that proclaims that we can get as close to another human as to become one in body and spirit – no matter how different the details of our birth” (193). This statement defines the relationship between Deepa and Njoroge as one that is cosmopolitan and does not allow interference by racial ideologies.

In Verjee’s *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall*, Leena falls in love with her childhood native African friend, Mike and they begin an affair without the knowledge of her family. Having been born in Kenya and been brought up there, she does not see any difference between her and Mike. The two therefore develop strong feelings of romance towards one another and end up in a love affair, against the wish of their parents. The relationship between Leena and Mike demystifies the misconceptions of Asians inability to relate with the native Africans.

Going to the Cinema

The East African Asians are also known for their fascination with going to the cinema to watch films, especially during Sunday afternoons, as a form of leisure activity. Warah (2021) describes the fascination which began from the sixties to present as, ‘a culture where moving-going was an integral part or the social fabric of this economically successful minority.’ (2) The movies, mostly Asian, are used to expose the diasporic community to their cultures and languages as a way of helping them retain their identity. The movies are also seen to promote the Asian sexist culture where women are depicted as subservient to men and issues such as cross-racial relationships and marriages abhorred. In countries like Tanzania, Sunday evenings shows are meant for family and community bonding, ‘Cinema halls were not lifeless chunks of brick and mortar; they resonated with soul and spirit. They were places that gave individual lives meaning, spaces that gave a town emotional life. Across generations, cinemas were central to the community formation.’ (Fair, 2020). This statement emphasizes on the role cinema plays in defining the East African Asian identity through socialization and enlightenment.

The characters in the selected texts are also actively engaged in watching cinema. For instance, Smasher in Tejani’s *Day After Tomorrow* has the first date with Nanziri by going to watch a movie together followed by a series of other similar events. The movie theatres therefore become avenues for bonding especially in cross-racial relationships. It is from watching the movies that Samsher and Nanziri decide to get married despite being from different racial backgrounds.

In Vassanji’s *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vikram narrates how he came to meet the girlfriend Yasmin while in Dar es Salam. They later went to watch films together, as the relationship grew and blossomed. Although they do not end up getting married, because of Vikram’s lifestyle of travelling from one country to the other, the movies play a critical role in cementing their relationship.

Interrogating Culinary Infusion in East Africa

Food plays a crucial role in defining a community’s identity. It marks borders between communities as well as act as a way of reconciling different groups (Ojwang, 2013). The East African Asian writings have captured the issue of food adversely to delineate different nuances of their lives as diasporas. As Holtzman

(2006) observes, “food is an intrinsically multilayered and multidimensional subject- with social, psychological, physiological and symbolic dimensions.” (362).

The East African Asians have given a significant contribution to the region by introducing foods such as *pilau*, *samosa* and *chapati* which have ended up being adopted as the region’s favorite delicacies. Apart from introducing Asian foods, the community has also embraced foods from the region such as *ugali*, beef and *sukumawiki*, hence exhibiting a sense of assimilation.

In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vikram’s mother prepares delicious food made of hot ghee and spices, when visited by Mrs. Bruce on a Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Bruce enjoys the meal, promising to one day bring her family for lunch. The Asian community enjoy taking beer and soda when relaxing during the weekend. Whenever they meet as a community, the East African Asians ensure they have a blend of their culture with that of the native Africans in terms of the menu and music, “smells of hot ghee and spices filled the air in the backyards, ginger and garlic and chicken from one house, saffron and onion from another, fresh phulki, chapatis and daal from yet another. Lilting melodies and sad lyrics from Saigal, Hemant Kumar, and Talat filled the air courtesy of KBC’s Hindustani service on the shortwave.” (28). This describes the East African Asians’ effort to blend their culture with that of the natives through food and entertainment.

While growing up as a young man, Raj in Verjee’s *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall*, admires Pinto, an Asian political activist whom he regards as his role model. He keeps following him to watch his lifestyle, for instance, in the morning Raj notes that Pinto has his breakfast of omelette sandwich. “One day he took leftover fish curry along with a piece of thick white bread and ate it cold as he learned the man’s routine off by heart, tracked through his scratched toy binoculars.”(71). The food eaten by Pinto, an Asian, suggests his adaptation to the East African lifestyle, like the ‘white bread’ signifying the local ‘ugali’. This supports his bid to fight for the rights of Africans during the colonial regime.

The Language Matrix

Language is used as means of cultural transmission and translation. For instance, in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Sheila strongly desires to speak to her grandchildren in their native Punjabi language in order to emphasize on the importance of sticking to their culture, but cannot because they have already learnt the language of the region. At one moment when Vikram’s grandfather, Molabux initiates a conversation with him in their Punjabi language, he confesses to have had difficulty in keeping up with the conversation, as the language appears “fluid and too quick for my ears and the words and phrases I grasped were often alien to me.” (61). Therefore, language is seen as not immune to hybridity, and the purist sense of belonging that would be suggested by the ability to speak in Hindi or Punjabi is deceptive. (Mwairumba, 2015).

The East African Asians are able to learn and competently use English and as Kiswahili, the main languages, with Kiswahili being a language that originated from the East African Coast and eventually became the national language used in the region, in their social and business engagements. The Asians use English instead of their own language, mostly when interacting with the colonial masters, while Kiswahili language is mostly used by the third generation East African Asians in their daily interaction with native Africans or even among themselves. Like Leena and Jai in Verjee’s *Who Will Catch Us as We Fall*, are fond of speaking Kiswahili. When she arrives in Kenya from London, she thanks the officer at the immigration department who stamps her passport “Asante”, meaning ‘thank you’. As they drive through the streets of Nairobi with her brother Jai, they encounter street boys who are demanding for some money from them, “Kunisaidia mama, they implore. Tu kitu kidogo.” (Verjee, 9). The language used by the street boys indicates that it is the national language and everyone who is a citizen of the country is expected to understand it. Jai, being a citizen of Kenya by birth, understands Kiswahili and therefore is able to answer the boys, ‘Sitaki’ meaning ‘I don’t want’.

II. Conclusion

The paper looked at how the East African Asians have navigated around their feelings of fear and anxiety by asserting their presence in the region through participation in various activities. They have worked hard towards establishing themselves economically, socially, politically and intellectually, with their strong presence being felt in such areas as trade. The East African Asians have also established themselves as a powerhouse economically by establishing thriving businesses in the region and beyond. East Africa region prides itself in such names as Aga Khan, Manu Chandaria, Jevanjee, Allidina Vishram among others when it comes to business and investment. This aspect of asserting themselves in the host countries has made the East African Asians develop a cosmopolitan identity, where they have viewed themselves as citizens of the world. The characters in the selected texts actively negotiate their belonging with both the colonial and post-colonial governments in the region through collaboration. This negotiation revolves around the process of identity formation among the community that seems to be achieved through citizenship. This status of citizenship helps the East African Asians to overcome their fears and anxieties of expulsion and persecution, giving them freedom to move across boundaries as they engage in trade. Their participation in the political affairs of the host

countries gives them the hope and assurance of being rewarded by the new regimes through appointments in government positions, a thing that later on turns out to be a pipe dream.

It therefore emerges that, although scholars like Ojwang (2013) have raised valid questions concerning the future of East African Asian dislocated identity as a result of their anxieties and fears, this paper finds that the community is slowly embracing integration with host countries. There is a paradigm shift in the identity formation process, especially from the perspective of the present and future generation, which is not racial but cosmopolitan, making them citizens of the world. This is manifested in the selected texts where young Asian characters have no issue interacting with everybody including the native Africans through education and social engagements. The group experiences more problems, fears and anxieties with their parents, who form the second generation of East African Asians, than the native Africans. The children however, develop a rebellious attitude towards the racial and discriminatory beliefs in their community by having intimate relationships across different races and social status.

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