The Pleasures and Tribulations of Migration

The sense of displacement and estrangement that assails migrants and diasporas is one of the most enduring subjects of East African Asian fiction, which presents images of wandering through strange territory, flight from undesirable homes, expulsions from spaces held dear, the scattering of communities and attempts to restore a sense of wholeness amidst the threat of alienation. The figure of an exiled Indian narrator from a Third World country writing out the story of his dislocation in his bleak dwelling in a European or North American city, a figure popularized by V. S. Naipaul in *The Mimic Men* (1967), appears several times in this body of fiction. So does the figure of the sojourner in a hostile African terrain, or lonely merchants in isolated trading outposts. The three writers under study in this chapter, M. G. Vassanji, Bahadur Tejani and Peter Nazareth, have written about the multiple displacements of African Asians: their migration from India, alienated life within East Africa, and sometimes, eventual departure for Europe or North America where the sense of alienation continues.

In spite of this commonality, the three writers evince very different approaches to displacement, and in the process tell us a lot about changes in East African writing as a whole. The treatment of the theme of displacement in Tejani and Nazareth differs considerably from that of Vassanji, a difference that I account for by considering the intellectual and historical contexts in which their writing was conducted. While the novels of Tejani and Nazareth express the desire for national belonging in East African countries, Vassanji pursues a post-national ideal given the historical experience of Asian migrants under nationalist states. Whereas Tejani and Nazareth wrote during the first two decades of independence—the 1960s and 1970s—a period in which there was a general belief in the value of African nationalism, Vassanji only began to publish his works in the late 1980s, a time when African nationalist discourses had already been delegitimized. If Tejani and Nazareth toyed with the possible assimilation of the Asian diaspora into the melting pot of new national cultures, which were being nurtured in the early years of political independence, Vassanji’s work expresses unease.
about projects of nation-building in East Africa, while extolling the virtues and depicting the pain of remaining politically on the fence. Nonetheless, there are subtle differences in the approaches by Nazareth and Tejani. While Tejani’s nationalism is of a romantic kind, Nazareth’s is a more skeptical one, given its Marxist sensitivity to power relations within emergent nation-states. The key task in this chapter, in brief, is to account for these different stances on the question of migration, nationhood and alienation. In the process, I shed light on the contributions that Tejani, Nazareth and Vassanji have made to notions of exile and displacement, which remain central in the understanding of post-colonial culture in the twentieth century.

Exile and displacement have regularly cropped up in East African literature, expressing as they do the conditions brought upon the region by colonial modernity: a sense of fragmentation and loss which, in turn, feeds the quest for homes and homeliness. In the fiction of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, for instance, black leaders of the colonial period are often cast in the mould of biblical figures such as Moses or the Messiah. Ngugi’s writing of the African experience of colonialism as a kind of exile drew heavily upon the Jewish model of diaspora, a result of his Christian education. The nationalist yearning for a homeland, which Ngugi’s work represents, and the melancholic mood that informs those works indicates that for him, homelessness is indeed a sad fate.

However, alongside the understanding of displacement as a dreadful punishment, a view has developed that the loss of a home might be a positive value. If, as Edward Said has observed, “[i]n premodern times banishment was a particularly dreadful punishment since it not only meant years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places,” those very qualities of homeliness for which the premoderns felt such a strong affinity have acquired a dubious reputation for many contemporary, especially postmodernist, intellectuals. The very quality of marginality that had been the source of unhappiness for people of the ancient world has become a positive force in the lives of those that Eva Hoffman has named “the new nomads,” the new cosmopolitans who refuse to sentimentalize the idea of home. Within the ambit of much of post-colonial theory, exile and diaspora have become attractive positions from which to view the predicament of the contemporary world, with the nomad seen as offering unique insights into modernity and its aftermath. Exile has come to mean what Edward Said has termed “the state of not being fully adjusted,” and a “dislike [for] the trappings of accommodation and national well-being.” Meanings of diaspora and exile have become a lot less tied to their origins in violence and oppression. As many critics of post-colonial literary theory have pointed out, exile and diaspora have been emptied of much of their earlier historical meanings to bear the burden of relatively less painful experiences of travel and migration. In more daring usage, these terms have come to embody the human condition, as is captured in Hoffman’s statement that exile is