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Gender, Sexuality and Community

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I have considered how East African Asian writings depict the ways in which patriarchal interests among the Asian immigrants manipulate gender in attempts to mark the limits of identity. I have also examined what is at stake in such attempts to wrest control of the communal and personal imaginary. This chapter revisits that discussion, but deliberates more specifically on how the various interests within the diasporic groups in the writing are fostered, or even thwarted, by the language of gender. As I hope to have shown, the predominant language that diasporic Indian characters use to describe their contact with other cultural groups are drawn from the domain of gender. However, much as it may seem that the immigrants direct their anxieties about moral, divine and racial purity onto outsiders who are seen to threaten the community’s sense of wholeness, these fears are also always pointed inwards, reaping as many casualties inside as they do on the outside. Because the Shamsi gender discourses in his fiction are generally attuned to elaborate image-building—the maintenance of honor—one of Vassanji’s main tasks as a revisionist is to uncover the hypocrisy that is involved in such processes. Vassanji’s fiction bears witness to the contradiction inherent in the imagining of community: the comforts of home are always haunted by the coercive moments of their consolidation. If the most visible action of the “cult of domesticity” is how it endeavours to keep the strange firmly on the outside, Vassanji’s fiction provides a reminder of the coercion that is involved in such attempts to create a sense of home on the “inside.”

If homes are to be understood as places of care and nurture, the corollary also has to be admitted: that they can also be places of violence and exclusion, where conformity is aimed even if it is not ultimately achieved.

As Seidenberg has noted, there has been a tendency among those writing on East African Asian history to accede to the pervasive myth that “the glue of shared experience” was more important than the inequalities and differences within Asian communities—that unity within the diaspora was
ultimately more crucial than any schisms. It is therefore not entirely surprising that very few scholars have explored the class differences within the Indian diaspora in East Africa. The major casualties of the unitary image of the diaspora have been the women and poor members of the Indian communities, all of whose stories have been submerged by that of the largely male, middle-class merchant and professional classes. In response to such uni-dimensional renderings of the diaspora’s history, Seidenberg has painted the caricature of “a poor Indian male in a remote area saving his pennies for the security of his family and for future generations.” 3 facetious as it may seem, this caricature is a telling critique of the way the diaspora’s story has been told, especially the extent to which it has blocked from view much of what does not fit into its dominant frame. This chapter examines Vassanji’s simultaneous presentation of gender as a necessary category in the invention of community and as a repressive performance that imperils personal and social desire. In presenting the ambivalent location of Asian women vis-à-vis community, Vassanji does not deny that they had vested interests in the construction of their communities, but merely emphasizes that such interests were not always served by the rhetoric of Asian identity. One of Vassanji’s intentions is to disaggregate the notion of a well-bound community of Indians in East Africa, hence his attention to gender as a locus of difference and contradiction within the community. If Vassanji’s ouevre, with the exception of The Book of Secrets, assumes a heterosexual Asian diasporic subject, the final section of this chapter is about the challenge posed to heteronormativity by queer diasporic sexualities. In rejecting the patriarchal logic of reproduction, Shailja Patel’s Migritude and Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla’s Ode to Lata show how alternative sexualities undermine the monological claims of diasporic cultural nationalism.

Time, space, woman

The intense labor that has gone into the creation of the migrant cultures that East African Asian writers depict has been both constructive and destructive: constructive because it has involved summoning a culture into being, and negative because such acts of social engineering have ultimately been based on certain patterns of exclusion. Vassanji’s fiction defines its task as one of subverting such acts of erasure, through elaborate attempts at historical reconstruction. In a deliberate gesture, Vassanji foregrounds women in an attempt to give greater prominence to what dominant historiographies have normally elided. The important roles played by the female characters in his fiction attests to this attempt to re-imagine the place of women in the diaspora’s history: the centrality of Kulsum, Amina, Ji Bai and Bibi Taratibu in The Gunny Sack; 4 Khanoum and Mariamu in the The Book of Secrets; and Zera in No New Land, all attest to this concern. 5 Vassanji lays