In a discussion of the history of the East African Indians, Dana April Seidenberg has argued that the relative proximity of the region to the Indian sub-continent has meant that the diaspora has tended to look to the land of origins as the sole locus of its cultural heritage and inspiration. Unlike the Caribbean case where the descendants of nineteenth century indentured Indian laborers were integral to the creation of a creolized culture that also includes African, European and Chinese elements, “feudal hierarchies and religious prohibitions of pre-modern India” have persisted in the East African case, freezing the lives of the immigrants on “a sociological order of rigid vertical relationships.” In the colonial period, the above was compounded by laws which sought to define the roles of racial groups within the economy, an arrangement which found favor among “sectarian group elites” who were consequently intolerant of any attempts by members to step out of the “sectarian group or commercial circle.”\(^1\) The older forms of sectarian loyalty have been buttressed by the imperatives of the competitive capitalist marketplace, and the attendant need for survival, which have only deepened the isolation of the diaspora. Although exclusion has created economic success, it has been detrimental in terms of social integration. The moral policemen who have acted as guardians of tradition have contributed immensely to the lack of meaningful interaction and acculturation among Asians and Africans, Asians and Europeans, or even among the different Asian communities themselves. By generating moral panics, these purveyors of cultural purity have managed to portray their interest in power, and their “systematic discipline over the behaviour of their group members,” as the “transcendent values of Old India.”\(^2\) In the decade leading to independence, and in the post-independence years, this history of cultural exclusivism has routinely been invoked by African nationalist figures, culminating sometimes in the denial of citizenship, the withdrawal of business licences, and—most famously—the Ugandan Asian expulsions of 1972. For Seidenberg and many other commentators, group solidarity and the attendant ethnocentrism have contributed significantly to the friction between
the diaspora and other communities in East Africa. Indeed, the image of the cultural separation of Asian Africans is legion in literatures from East and Southern Africa as Charles Sarvan has shown.

For East African Asian writers, the popular image of diasporic Asian communities as hermetic has been a source of much anxiety, especially because of their cosmopolitan aspirations as intellectuals. The Ugandan political scientist Mahmood Mamdani recalls that as a young scholar of left-wing nationalist persuasion, he “shared with most progressive African intellectuals I know, an aversion to identifying with our immediate communities: whether you define them as ethnic, tribal, religious or racial. More than any other place I know, it is in Africa that progressive intellectuals pretended to be universal intellectuals, without an anchor in the ground below. If you were a Muganda, the mark of your progressiveness was that you consciously avoided speaking or writing in Luganda; if you were an Asian, you considered yourself apart from the Asian question.” This unease about identifying too closely with one’s community sprung from the need to forge inclusive forms of citizenship that would not be hindered by the sectarian interests that threatened the universalistic ambitions of modernity. The irony remains that the very sectarian divisions that modernist intellectuals sought to contain had themselves been exacerbated by modernity itself, but that is not to be my primary point of investigation in this chapter. Rather, I would like to examine how East African Indian writing has attempted to deal with the enduring image of Indian cultural indifference and isolation. By focusing on the fiction of Moyez Vassanji and Bahadur Tejani, one can get a glimpse into the ways in which Asian African intellectuals have sought imaginative answers to what is clearly one of the most sensitive questions in contemporary discussions of immigrant Asian cultures in Africa. One of the key preoccupations of these writers has been how to negotiate the multifarious demands of ethnicity, nationhood and the idea of a universal humanity, for indeed it requires a considerable degree of dexterity to be not only Indian and African, but also British and sometimes North American. If the quest for universality has been the defining tenet of modernity, it also needs to be conceded that the demands of a modern capitalist order have also created conditions for atomization on an unprecedented scale, which militated against the ideal of universality. This chapter is about how the writers in question have mobilized the notion of “cultural synthesis,” a popular concept in East African literary thought in the 1960s and 1970s, as a bulwark against sectarian divisions. Alongside the emphasis on the history, or the necessity, of cultural synthesis have also been attempts by some of those who have written on Indian cultures in East Africa to promote what Charles Taylor calls a “politics of recognition” (of otherness), within an ethic of multiculturalism.

Within the context of East African literary criticism, the term “cultural synthesis” is generally associated with the region’s first generation of writers