ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND GENDER THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY EAST AFRICAN LITERATURE

Dissertation
zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde
am Fachbereich Philosophie und Geisteswissenschaften,
Institut für Englische Philologie
der Freien Universität Berlin

vorgelegt von
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M.A, B.Ed (Hons)
Berlin, am Juni 23, 2011

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Die Disputation im Fach Englische Philologie wurde am 22.07.2011 abgelegt und das Promotionsverfahren mit der Gesamtnote 'magna cum laude' bestanden.

Contents

Acknowledgements

This research owes its completion to the important help and bureaucratic support offered by Prof. Dr. Jennifer Wawrzinek, Prof. Dr. Anja Schwarz and my supervisor–mentor, Prof. Dr. Dr. Russell West-Pavlov. Their regularly progress reports ensured that the contact and contract between my sponsors DAAD and me was sustained and healthy. I am indebted to you. Specifically, I wish to offer my sincere and heartfelt gratitude to Professor West-Pavlov for his guidance, sustenance and patronage throughout my research and teaching tour in Germany (September 2007 – August 2011). My stay at the Institute for English Philology as a teacher was made easy and comfortable courtesy of the wonderful assistance and friendship provided by Herr Werner Riemer, Mrs Maria Bonifacio-Migas and other members of staff, both administrative and academic.

I note with gratitude the generous moral and intellectual contribution, as well as commentary on a wide variety of topics covered in this work, by the following colleagues and friends: Ratidzai Magura, Temitope Olatubosun Omotayo, Sabine Conrad and Dr John Obiero Ogone; Dr: Ines Schramm and her husband Werner, Manka Munisi Siboe are noted. The same note of appreciation is extended to my former teacher Dr Garnette Oluoch-Olunya who also read sections of this work and offered their critical advice. For inspiration, a special note of thanks is extended to: Prof. Bernth Lindfors, Prof. Gail Fincham, Prof. Harry Garuba, Prof. James Ogude, Prof. Frank Schulze-Engler, Prof. Evan Mwangi, Prof. Emmanuel Mbogo, Prof. Meg Samuelson, Dr. Reuben Chirambo, Dr. John Mugubi, Mr and Mrs Vincent and Betty Kawoya, Dr. Lance P. Nadeau, Dr. Garnette Oluoch-Olunya, Prof. Dr. Christa Knellwolff, Messrs Jens Elze-Volland, Gautam Chakrabarty, Ferdinand Mbecha, Emmanuel Shikuku and all other postgraduate students I met during Prof. West-Pavlov's graduate seminar on postcolonial studies.

A work of this size and breadth naturally depends on extensive cooperation and aid from many individuals. I am indebted to Vincent F. Kawoya for helping me get access to the Moi Library at Kenyatta University during my research trip to Kenya in May 2009. On the same not I am grateful to Dr Susan Kiguli, Mzee Mwalimu Austin Bukenya and Prof. Sr. Dominica Dipio for enabling me to access critical material and research findings from their postgraduate students at the Makerere University library, Uganda. Dr. Hamza Njozi, currently of Muslim University, Morogoro, Tanzania, but then of University of Dar es Salaam, was helpful in the same manner. Thank you very much. A special note of thanks is accorded to various university administrative officers who are to many to reproduce here but helped me source for secondary materials in my field work in East Africa (May 2009 – July 2009). I am also grateful for the personal friendship of Dr Moyez Ghulamhussein Vassanji and Mzee Prof. Peter Nazareth, two leading writers from/of the Asian community in East Africa as well as Binyavanga Wainaina and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor: two emergent Kenyan writers of note whose work are studied in this dissertation.

Herr Michael Baumgardt of DAAD is recognized for his tireless communication that enabled issues revolving around the scholarship to be addressed and challenges overcome during the three-year long stay in Germany. Finally, the DAAD, as an institution, receives special appreciation for granting me the opportunity and necessary funding to pursue my academic growth and postgraduate studies at the Free University of Berlin.

The kind and helpful staff of the following libraries are also recognized for their various forms of assistance in accessing materials that helped shape the ideas in this book: Free University, Technical University of Berlin, Humbolt University (Zweigbibliothek – Asien- und Afrikawissenschaften), Makerere University,

University of Dar es Salaam, Kenyatta University and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, University of Leipzig Main Library, and the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town. I am grateful for the timely grant from the Free University of Berlin's Center for International Cooperation (CIC) enabled me to visit UCT and carry out examination of the rich collection of gender materials in April, 2009.

Finally, I confirm that chapter one appears as shorter essay published in an edited book in the course of my PhD work at the Institute for English Philology, Free University of Berlin, Germany. I hold the copyrights to the essay. The essay is included in this dissertation in a revised and expanded form with special reference to Promotionsordung 2008, §7, 1(a) of the Institute for English Philology, Free University of Berlin. Here are its publication details:

Makokha, J. K. S., (2011). "The Eternal Other: Authority of Deficit Masculinity in Asian African Literature." in *Men and Masculinities in African Fiction and Film.* Ed. Lahoucine Ouzgane. London: James Currey. ISBN: 1-84701-521-2. pp. 139-52.

Abstract

This study interrogates both long and short written prose by a distinguished sample of emergent and established writers from Kenya as a microcosm of East Africa. The sample includes both novels and short stories published in English. The region produces literature that is both written and oral. It also produces literature in vernacular language, the regional lingua franca, Kiswahili beside English. The term contemporary has been used here to denote generally the written tradition of English expression in the turn of the century (c. 1991-2011). The authors under study include: M. G. Vassanji, Binyavanga Wainaina and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor.

The study conducts a critical interrogation of new works by these writers. These are: *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), *No New Land* (1991) by Vassanji; *Discovering Home* (2002) by Wainaina and 'Weight of Whispers' (2003) by Owuor.

We are interested in examining how ethnicity and gender as two major indexes of identity in East Africa today are treated in exemplary works of short and long prose. Specifically, how do these two indices, in the hands of the selected writers of note, contribute to the aesthetic and formal thematization, as well as treatment, of identity issues? The study emanates from the need to contribute to critical studies that trace the recent contours of literary writing across Africa in light of the call for appreciations of diversity within African identity discourses especially in the context of expanding ethnic and gender conflicts. Creative imagination is one of the pathways by which a people or culture presents itself to the world. It represents their internal and external environments. To study the sociology of literature is to contribute in the creation of awareness around a society and its vocal agents. This is our guiding assumption and it is rooted to the core of postcolonial studies as a discipline.

The tendency to use or apply sociological parameters in the study of East African literature is well established. Owing to the multiracial and multicultural nature of the societies of the nation-states that make up the region, this is an almost natural phenomenon. These countries include Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Burundi. The first three countries, from whence comes the majority of our sample are homes to indigenous African communities and immigrant communities from South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula as well as visible communities of European descent. It these three strands of cultural heritage that make the composite core of East African identity as a region.

Naturally, a study of diverse writers and genres such as this one will rely on an eclectic but carefully selected set of theoretical practices/frameworks and

methodological orientations. The study draws from gender studies, postcolonialism and aspects of narratology in a research-based attempt to provide across seven chapters a scholarly panorama of contemporary Anglophone East African literature, its formal as well as thematic idiosyncrasies. The first and last chapters offer the introduction and conclusion respectively. The remaining chapters are analytical and form the body of the dissertation.

Key words: East Africa sub-region, contemporary (1991-2011) literature in English, literary criticism, identity politics, gender

Introduction: Backgrounds,

Interpretative Frameworks & Methodology of the Study

> Good literature reflects the life and spirit of a people. Writers hold a mirror up to their society. A society finds expression through its authors, and in this way it is the co-author of literary works...In its literature and art a society reveals its "soul". Molvaer (1997, p. ix)

With these words, the Dutch scholar of Ethiopian letters, Reidulf K. Molvaer in 1997 announced what is to us the truth about literature in general and literature produced in the Eastern part of the continent in particular. He came to this conclusion after several years of studying major writers of one of the national traditions from this sub-region of Africa, namely Ethiopian literature written in Amharic. The observation couched in the citation above appears at the outset of his remarkable study, *Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers* (1997).[1] Indeed Amharic literature is one of the oldest written traditions both in East Africa with its history of writing dating back to the 4th Century AD. It is then followed by written literature in Kiswahili and much later in the 20th Century with written literature in English. His reference to literature excludes the oral traditions which are even older and ubiquitous across the whole continent and the sub-region too. It is with this definition of literature as written texts and with its social relevance articulated by Molvaer above that we bring our attention in this study to what we consider to be examples of good literature from Kenya and Tanzania. In keeping with the Molvaerian observation above, this dissertation, therefore, is a study of contemporary writings

[1] He is also the author of another important work in East African literary studies, also on Ethiopian literature published in 1980, namely, *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia: Social and Cultural Life as Reflected in Amharic Fictional Literature ca. 1930-1974.* Leiden, Holland: E. J. Brill.

from Kenya, both long and short written prose by writers whose work address a cross-section of issues that touch on ethnicity and gender with relation to identity in East Africa today.

In this study we identify East Africa as one of the most multicultural and multiracial regions of Africa as a continent and operate from the conviction that the region's written tradition using English as a language of literary creativity has been grown by efforts of writers who come from different cultural backgrounds, which in turn reflects the socio-cultural composition of East African societies.

The writers selected for study as a case in point all come from Kenya and cut across three generations. Their works selected for the study, however offer a cross-sectional view of East African cultural pluralism. All these works have been published in the last two decades hence their description in the title of this study as "contemporary"; meaning works produced at the turn of the century by emergent writers as well as established writers. The writers are: M. G. Vassanji, Binyavanga Wainaina and Yvonne Awuor Odhiambo. Vassanji was born in Kenya but raised in Tanzania. Wainaina is the son of a Kenyan father and a Ugandan mother. Owuor, though a Kenyan, has written an award-winning short story on Rwandan refugees after the Rwandan Genocide of 1994.

Written literature in English across East Africa manifests itself in many genres, mainly: fiction prose (novels, novellas and short stories), non-fiction prose (autobiographies, biographies and autobiographical novels), poetry and plays (drama). However it is prose that has distinguished itself across East Africa, and indeed the continent and the rest of the postcolonial world, as the veritable vehicle for literary minds. It is this genre, especially the novel, that has driven to prominence the careers of writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nuruddin Farah of Somalia. This study looks at works of prose, both fiction and non-fiction, that have been produced by decorated writers above, who use English as their literary language.

The other novels selected for study include: M. G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *No New Land* (1991). We have also selected a novella, *Discovering Home* by Binyavanga Wainaina and 'Weight of Whispers' (2003), a short story by Yvonne Owuor.

Literary quality and accessibility guided my choice of the writers. The selections show a wide range of theme and style. Combining several theoretical frameworks, this study examines how issues of form and theme come together to elaborate the ideas as well as social visions of these writers and the societies they come from or write about. Identity is taken as a broad term encompassing, in this case, self and communal definitions of people on the basis of ethnicity as well as gender.

The eastern region of Africa displays a wide diversity of cultural patterns, languages, ethnic identities and religious practices. Geopolitically, the region encompasses – Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Southern Sudan and Burundi. The region, especially with reference to the first three countries, is normally approached in African literary studies as one heterogeneous unit with a high degree of similarities based on multiracialism and interculturalism emanating from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial contexts (e.g. Cook, 1965; Roscoe, 1977; Killam, 1984; Smith, 1989, Griffith, 2000; Gikandi & Mwangi, 2007; Ogude and Nyairo, 2007; Makokha, Kabaji & Dipio, 2011). Their contiguity of these countries and their proximity to the Indian Ocean sea-board has turned the region over many centuries into a crossroad of diverse African, European, Asian and Arabian cultural influences that have made their marks on the identities of the people of this region as well as their cultural production literature included. Therefore, in order to appreciate the nature or range of identities that exist in the region a comprehensive study formulated on the basis of several relevant theoretical frameworks can help offer a fresh cross-sectional image of contemporary East African themes and literary styles too. Here, perhaps for the first time, is a study that cuts across region, ethnicity and generation to

offer a panorama of East African literature across divides that have guided earlier works.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

A field trip to East Africa (May-July, 2009) revealed that, although new prose writers have emerged since the 1990s, some of whom have earned international awards and acclaim, fewer research-based studies conducted in Departments of Literature in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania on their works. Studies that exist have focussed on the canon of East African prose and more so on the canonical works of such writers, especially Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye from Kenya. Other studies concentrate on other genres mainly oral literature and also drama.

The present study addresses this critical paucity. It draws on a wide range of sources to examine whether ethnicity and gender affect the formal choices that contemporary prose writers use in order to bring out their thematic concerns. This is the link between the chapters of the study focussing on Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and No New Land (1991), Binyavanga Wainaina's *Discovering Home* (2002) and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's 'Weight of Whispers' (2003). The prose works based on social realism are used as a mirror of the society in East Africa across several divides in order to explore questions of identity in a changing post-colonial and intercultural environment. The study commences by a demonstration of how discourses of gender studies and postcolonialism can help expand our reception of the protagonists and themes of the selected works. These protagonists and themes mirror familiar challenges from the societies we come from and live in. A better understanding of both further validates the mandates of literature as a discipline and a field of humanistic knowledge.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

i. What is the purpose and effect of the narrative techniques employed by the selected writers?
ii. To what extent have the selected writers employed different narrative strategies thus showcasing their individual talent in using the genre of their choice?
iii. What is the significance of the ethnic and gender identities of the writers to the formal and thematic aspects of their writing?

Research Assumptions

The study will be based on the following assumptions:

i. The narrative strategies employed in the selected works can influence a reader's appreciation of the characters and narrators of these works.
ii. Form and content are often intertwined in works of social realism such as the ones selected for this study.
iii. A cross-sectional study of East African writing in English is important in that it helps us unpack some of the key themes of postcolonial discourse and further enhances our appreciation of literature as an agent for social change

Theoretical Framework

A work of this range and scope naturally relies on an eclectic theoretical framework. In this work, aspects of gender studies, postcolonial theory and narratology are brought

together in each of the chapters in order to address the aims and objectives of the study conceived as responses to the questions above. Of particular significance will be the masculinity studies perspective when we think of gender studies, especially in Chapter 1, postcolonialism when we get to Chapter 2, postcolonialism and narratology in Chapter 3 and postcolonialism and gender studies in the final chapter. These theoretical perspectives enhance objectivity and scientific rigour in the course of the study and offer the interpretative grid for the literary excerpts identified for analysis or discussion from the selected texts.

Research Methodology

The study has mainly employed qualitative methodology of based on library research across several universities in East Africa and in Germany as pointed out in the acknowledgement. This research entailed close readings of selected primary texts as well as their analysis within the theoretical framework highlighted above. This approach is of great significance to the reading of the texts in the sense that as a framework of critical methods, these theoretical understanding, will help us examine contexts, texts as well as form and theme. Relevant secondary readings have also been used in each of the seven analytical chapters in order to further ground the arguments and discussions on solid critical and intellectual bases. The study has four analytical chapters that are bracketed by this introduction and a conclusion. It also has a bibliography at the end as well as a German translation of the abstract. Attached at the very end is an annotated curriculum vitae.

Chapter Breakdown

Introduction is the first section of the study.

1. Chapter one looks at themes based on ethnicity and identity issues from the perspective of masculinities studies using Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *No New Land (*1991) as case-studies.
2. Chapter two focuses on two versions of Wainaina's *Discovering Home* first published in 2002. The first sections of the chapter highlight the themes of identity and change in the story with respect to the novella's 2003 version. The final sub-section looks at issues of narrative mode with particular respect to the expanded version of the novella published in 2006.
3. Chapter three uses Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's award-winning short story, 'Weight of Whispers' (2003) to examine questions of ethnic identity and gender in the context of exile or refugee status.

Finally, there is a conclusion at the end summarising the study and offering ways forward for further research**.**

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1

Chapter One

Narrating Masculinities in Asian African Literature: Special References to Vassanji's Protagonists in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *No New Land* (1991)

1.0. Introduction

M. G. Vassanji is the pen name of Moyez Ghulamhussein Vassanji, a Canada-based novelist born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950 and raised up in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania before living for studies in the United States. He later settled in Toronto with his family after doctorate studies in Nuclear Physics at Massachussetts Institute of Technology (M. I. T.); first as an expert in Nuclear Physics and from 1990 as a full-time writer. He has won the prestigious Giller Prize twice: the inaugural prize itself in 1994 with his novel based in Tanzania, *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and again in 2004 with his novel based in Kenya, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003). Vassanji also won the 1989 Commonwealth Prize for the Best First Book with his inaugural novel, *The Gunny Sack* (1989) set in Tanzania and Kenya. The novel was first published by Heinemann under the distinguished African Writers Series that has Chinua Achebe as its founding editor. He is the author of several other novels, a memoir and two collections of short stories as well as a biography of the late novelist, Mordechai Richler.

As part of the literature in East Africa produced by members of the Indian Diaspora occupying several countries in this sub-region, the fiction of M. G. Vassanji reveal an enduring interpretation of Asian African identities. These identities, masculinities included, are always located in-between the White identities and Black identities reflecting the multiracial nature of many societies in countries such as Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This in-betweeness, whether imagined or real, is the

location of cultural ambivalence that is the hall-mark of its occupants and is always portrayed as one with its own deficiencies.

Taken as representative occupants of that in-between location, for instance, the experience of manhood and masculinities among the Asian Africans is always shown to be affected by the masculinities of the Whites or the Blacks in East Africa always in a negative manner. Shiva Naipaul, once cynically pointed out that the existence of the Asian African in East Africa can best be captured by the phrase "caught in-between the master and the slave" (Naipaul, 1978, p. 121). It is this awareness of the deficit location, epistemologically-speaking that made Naipaul criticize the relationships between the three races in East Africa thus:

> The African, if he wishes to, can dress like a European, talk like a European, affect European ideas, gain entry to European clubs. He can cultivate Western mannerisms and Western ideals to his heart's content. He can never be Asianized in the same way. The Asian is the eternal "other." Consequently, the African demands his destruction—often expressed as a demand for his "integration." It is not accidental that the sexual inaccessibility of Asian African women excites so many rancours. Asian integration has to be physical, to be literal. Nothing else will do. (p. 121)

This chapter attempts a reading of selected Asian African literature in general and two novels by M. G. Vassanji in particular. This novelist is the most prolific prose writer from the Asian African community in East Africa. He has written a number of novels capturing the condition of his community as a diasporic people living in Africa with ancestral roots in the Indian sub-continent. The two novels that we shall subject to scholarly scrutiny as we examine the images of protagonists in them are: *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *No New Land* (1991).

The chapter begins with a general discussion based on the argument that the authoritative interpretation of Asian African cultural identities by Asian African

writers, like Vassanji, presents a fertile field for theorising the contemporary trends in the study of men and masculinities in African literature. More than just signifiers of Asian African social experiences, Asian African literatures are a significant constituency of contemporary Africa's cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism.

The general discussion is followed at the very end by an examination of the protagonists of the two novels who are both quintessential representations of Asian African males from East Africa. By so doing we hope to highlight aspects of Asian African masculinities as depicted in fictions based on the principle of social realism.

1.1. Rethinking Postcolonial Masculinities in Africa: What does the Asian African Writer Want?

Some scholars argue that East African literary tradition, like that of the rest of the continent, is mostly a masculine world (Stratton, 1995). However the ongoing revisioning of postcolonial notions of nationhood and nationness with particular respect to *inter alia* ethnic, gender, and racial diversity (Bhabha 1994) leads to the awareness of Others subaltern groups such as the Asian Africans (Makokha 2005a). These revisions ostensibly issue challenges to the idea of African masculinity or *masculinity in Africa* as a homogenous [and monolithic] category of social analysis. In this light, it appears that there is indeed a "crisis in masculinity" characterized by postmodernist politics of fragmentation as foreshadowed by (Connel, 1995).

The ongoing remembering and re-membering of Other social groups to the national body of the erstwhile negrocentric East African postcolonies has as its impetus revisionist thinking within postcolonial discourse. Bhabha has argued that a revisionist politics and theory of the margins of postcolonial nations is both theoretically innovative and politically crucial when it is informed by the need [and commitment] to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities (Bhabha,

1994). He maintains there is a need to focus on those moments and processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. In his view, it is these in-between spaces that provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of individual or collective selfhood. These strategies in turn initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining society itself (Bhabha, 1994:1-2). The revisionist thinking within postcolonial discourses, seen from the perspective of literature, reveals that East African nationals are becoming aware of the culturo-racial ambivalence of their various nation-states. For instance the Nairobi-based *Kwani?* --- the only significant literary journal in East Africa today --- has been publishing a cross-racial and transcultural corpus of creative works from writers who come from White, Brown and Black communities (www.kwani.org).

This integrative awareness that unites the national cultures in the wake of a strong globalizing process has a peculiar meaning. It undercuts authoritative patriarchal roles and prerogatives within conservative spheres of the postcolony and thus carries a particular symbolic load. It in fact marks a disruptive beginning of the end of the radical thinking of postcoloniality as a Black Man's metanarrative, signified by Ngugi wa Thiong'o radical politics in the early 1970s (See introduction to Ngugi, 1972). This is a fact that African intellectuals and Africanists need to pay due attention to as a matter of urgency.

The politics and practice of recognizing diversity within categories of postcolonial analysis such as class, race and gender was first experienced within East Africa in feminist discourses and critiques. Stratton (1995) has provided a remarkable feminist study of the politics of gender in contemporary African literary tradition. Her study is indeed a major challenge to the idea of contemporary African literary tradition as a masculine world, or more accurately, a negrocentric, masculine world. In their own statements, interventions, theories and critiques, feminist literary scholars in Africa have employed the politics of diversification in emphasizing the operation of

monolithic male power over women. They have done so in tandem with other non-African(ist) postcolonial feminist thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She has provided influential interventions within postcolonialism by pointing, without discounting the importance of women's oppression, to the racial, class, and ethnic diversity within the whole episteme of femininity (Spivak, 1998). This contrahegemonic tendency to fragment former unitary metanarratives such as postcolonialism and metacategories such as masculinity has important ramifications for Masculinity studies and Masculinity scholarship especially in the multiracial ex-colonial worlds such as East Africa. It points to the reality that East African masculinity, or simply put, masculinity in East Africa is fragmented and reflects power imbalances among men. The conceptualization of masculinity in contemporary East Africa as simply "the masculinity of Blacks" *a la* Heald, (1995), Ouzgane (2002) or Muriungi (2002) is indeed important but not sufficient. In this respect when scholars such as Muhomah (2002) talk about versions of masculinity in Kenyan literature not just economic versions should occupy our mind but also *inter alia* ethnic and racial versions of masculinity as well.

When one considers the growing interest in the literatures produced by former marginal communities in the postcolonies such as Asian Africans, it appears that multiple masculinities are emergent or are asserting their authority within the context of East African literature. These masculinities encourage the idea that historically hegemonic forms of masculinity, such as the Black masculinity are undergoing crises requiring revision and/or re-vision. An example of this hegemonic view of African masculinity as the Blackman's masculinity can be best seen in the person, figure and symbol, politics and practice of the late Nigerian maestro, Fela Akunilapo Kuti. Stanovsky (1998) supplied a fascinating account of how masculinity of Fela, as a postcolonial cultural icon is packaged for consumption in the West and why. Fela, the man and the artist, present a typical case of African masculinity as perceived through

(post)colonial lenses. His polygynous and mysogynist lifestyle not only assimilates him easily into popular expectations for Black men, but also perceives in him the embodiment of masculinity in the African context. Nevertheless, the question that arises is this: to what extent would the postcolonial masculinity in Africa typified by Fela be said to be the true *post*-colonial masculinity in Africa?

In my view, that extent, whatever the scope, will only be giving the dominant hegemonic face/phase of postcolonial masculinities in contemporary Africa. This is because, just as the aesthetic roots of East African literature are diversified and hybrid, so is the category of masculinity as a site of/for personal and communal selfhood negotiations. Diversity in masculinities across the world is now a fertile ground of literature (Connell, 1995; Whitehead, 2002; Haywood and Ghaill, 2003; Ouzgane and Morrell, 2005; Mugambi and Allan, 2009; Reeser, 2010). Some scholars do agree that it is now time for recognition of diversity among men, by activists in the men's movement and by theorists of masculinity (Nye 2005). In a special issue of the authoritative postcolonial journal, *Jouvert,* Ouzgane and Coleman (1998) have discussed at length what they call "postcolonial masculinities." Their solid discussion is crucial as a signal to gender theorists within African postcolonial studies. The two scholars, by imagining and asserting postcolonial masculinities, participate in the politics of diversity reminiscent to that of Spivakian postcolonial feminism. The special issue of *Jouvert* edited by the two scholars can be read as a revelation of lessons to be learnt from masculine practices in postcolonial locations. These locations are diverse sites of intercultural conflict and negotiation that have emerged in the wake of European colonialism--practices that challenge and modify conventional understandings of men and masculinity

Ouzgane and Coleman (1998) discuss various ways how the study of masculinities reveals about the complex structures of relations between men, and between men and women in the postcolonies. The main question that they posit is:

how might *a new awareness* of kinetic, hybridized masculinities inform postcolonial analyses of institutions such as colonial and nation-state patriarchies, neo-colonial paternalism, anticolonial machismo? It is this "new awareness," that we have invoked in this chapter to grapple with the nature of masculinities evident in the literature of Asian African writers from East Africa. Masculinity studies in postcolonial spaces such as East Africa need to highlight and engage the ambivalences obtaining from the masculinities of the fissures and the margins. Seen from such a perspective, Ouzgane and Coleman (1998) argue that Masculinity studies have an important epistemological contribution to make to the general body of postcolonial thought. In their own submission, there are three main contributions that masculinity studies can supply to postcolonial studies in general or postcolonial criticism in particular. Firstly, masculinity studies can contribute to feminist critiques, such as offered by Spivak, of the sexist and homophobic practices that have often derailed movements towards liberation and decolonization. Secondly, masculinity studies bring a balance to the Marxian arrogation of class over gender, sexuality, and race as primary domains of social struggle. Thirdly, the analytical apparatus of a hierarchy of masculinities—hegemonic, complicitous, marginalized, and subordinated—refines the accuracy of our understanding of the complex range of positions between dominance and resistance that characterize postcolonial societies such as East Africa.

Ouzgane and Coleman (1998) submit: "the study of a diverse range of masculinities requires the simultaneous consideration of a whole variety of categories along with class--including race, gender, sexuality, physical ability, age, and ethnicity." (n.p). It is for this reason that I posit the inability of the four aspects of the hierarchy of masculinities they offer above, to sufficiently intellectualize the experience of Asian African men. Can the Asian African men we meet in the literary works of Asian African writers from East Africa comfortably be considered under hegemonic, complicitous, marginalized or suboordinated masculinities? The answer is

no. And the following discussion will highlight the reasons as to why this is the case. But first, given my position regarding the range of masculinities identified by the two scholars above, the term "deficit masculinity" is used to refer to the interstitial, marginal and yet somehow privileged masculinity of Asian Africans of East Africa.

1.2. The Asian African Writer and Interstitiality as the Index of Deficit Masculinity

With the exception of Jameela Siddiqi, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Shailja Patel, Sikeena Karmali, Sophia Mustafa, and Rasna Warah, most of Asian African writers from East Africa are men. In fact the three female writers only appeared on the East African literary scene as part of the new wave of third-generation East African writing that began a decade or so ago. They can be viewed as contemporaries of writers such as Dipesh Pabary or Mehul Gohil both from Kenya and Jules Damji from Tanzania. However, Peter Nazareth, Bahadur Tejani, Jagjit Singh from Uganda and Kuldip Sondhi together with Pheroze Nowrojee from Kenya are all older male writers who are Ngugi's contemporary. Their presence in the East African literary scene spans the last half a century despite the fact that most scholarly commentary on East African literature never mentions their efforts. With the radical decolonization projects of immediate post-independence dispensation in East Africa that reached its (anti)climax with the famous Asian Expulsion from Uganda in 1972/3, to really reveal the racial politics underlying East Africa's postcolonial thought.

In his powerful and famous poem, 'A Portrait of the Asian as an East African,' Jagjit Singh demonstrated how independence was interpreted as the transfer of *inter alia* political authority from the White Male colonizer to the Black Male colonized. Singh employs an oral narrative technique to provide a lamenting Asian African male persona regretting his racial identity in a changing Africa of the 1960s. This new Africa

could only have a developed racial consciousness, only that this consciousness could only see the world in terms of Black and White. The persona laments:

> For I, too, would have liked to think
> Only the toes of Africa were infected.
> But the cancer of colour
> Has gathered fresh victims now.
> Black surgeons, too, have prescribed new drugs
> And we,
> Malignant cells,
> Must fade away soon. (in Cook and Rubadiri, 1971, pp. 156-9)

This vivid image of the Asian African's racial awareness on the dawn of self-rule in East Africa appears to be connected with the interstitiality of the community in the colonial past. Although indeed most of the forefathers of present-day Asian Africans were the oil that lubricate the colonial machinery and drove the British imperial project in East Africa (Seidenberg, 1997), their second-class stature made them more immediate to the Black Africans who interpreted the Asian African's racial difference as otherness. It is in this context that the interstitial sense of many Asian Africans captured by the alienation that Singh's persona suffers above was mainly interpreted as a classic fence of "fence-sitting."

In his premier collection of critical essay, *Homecoming,* Ngugi made it clear that in the decolonization project in East Africa, "fence-sitting" or any kind of interstitiality was not to be tolerated (Ngugi, 1972, p. i-ix). One either was with the oppressive minority colonizer or with the oppressed majority colonized. What never occurred to this Ngugian line of thinking is that in any engagement between two conflicting spheres of influence, certain ambivalence is always in the offing. This ambivalence indeed alerts all to the existence of a third space in the Manichean relationship within the African postcolonies. In fact as (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37) pointed out, "the intervention

of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People." Interestingly, the same affirmation of the Interstice as a location of selfhood to certain postcolonial peoples was made in an Asian African play produced around the same tyime that Ngugi was making his declaration.

This situation is aptly stated in a question posited by Mr. Majid, an Asian African character out of Kuldip Sondhi's brilliant play, *The Undesignated,* "[I]snt there equal opportunities for all of us? I was a second-class citizen under the British. Am I going to remain a second-class citizen under the [Black] African as well?" (p. 30). In this short radio play, broadcasted in the African Service of the BBC in 1972, Mr. Prem Guru, a seasoned Guru is hosting a party in honour of one Solomon Ohanga. The latter is poised to take up the position of the GM [General Manager] in the Ministry of Transport under the ongoing Africanization [read nativist] programme, common in the first decade of East African self-rule. The incumbent GM is retiring and the most qualified person to replace him, if meritocracy was to apply, is definitely Mr. Guru. Yet, this is not the case. Mr. Majid, one of Mr. Guru's guests and subordinates contests and interrogates the authority of the decolonization logic that is being used in the postcolonial dispensation to Africanize the erstwhile White-dominated government.

Although, Mr. Guru agrees with Mr. Majid, he scolds the junior engineer for his rouble-rousing attitude. Yet, we know the truth that Mr. Guru and Mr. Majid, although considered as beneficiaries of postcolonial spoils, unlike the White man who has to leave, cannot hold positions of authority such as the post of the GM. This is so because, although the two are considered as postcolonials and thus able to benefit from the fruit of independence, they are not African enough, at least their skin colour

is not. In other words, the two Asian African men are not racially potent, in fact masculine enough, to fully possess power within postcolonial masculine systems in Africa. Allegorically, this impotency to belong, or *the ability to be undesignated* within the epistemological framework of postcolonial thinking, especially in east African literature replicates itself in many other forms throughout the intellectual terrain of Asian African literature. In the tragic years that followed the Asian Expulsion, Peter Nazareth writing from his new home in Iowa mused:

> One [a critic of Ugandan literature] must…consider the question of Amin's expulsion of Asians in 1972. *Does it follow that 'Asians' who left Uganda because of Amin's expulsion are no longer Ugandan writers?* Bahadur Tejani was teaching at Nairobi while I was working for the government of Uganda. Both of us had our Ugandan citizenship taken away, not for the novels we had published few months earlier but simply because the decision was to take away the citizenship of Asians. Jagjit Singh was studying at Sussex University at the time and also had his citizenship taken away. *Does this automatically remove Asian writing from the area of Uganda writing?* Some writers of 'Asian origin' like Lino Leitao wrote stories in Uganda, *which were published outside the country.* Micheal Sequiera published one poem in the Howard Seargent anthology of Commonwealth poetry and now writes journalistic articles from Canada. Ganesh Bagchi wrote, produced and acted in Shavian one-act plays for Uganda's annual drama festival. His own plays were published in Heinemann anthologies after he left Uganda to return to India (and later to England, where he now lives.) *Where in the world does the serious critic of literature accept that the president of the country has a right to decide on literary matters?* (in Killam 1984, p. 8) [Emphasis added].

In this thought-provoking reflection on the location of the Asian African writer from east Africa in the postcolonial discourse Nazareth reiterates the words of Majid. He confirms to us that the price to be paid by being a dweller of in-between locations, be they political or otherwise, is usually dear especially when it destabilizes the ways through which we perceive the world and ourselves. The problem of perception,

nevertheless does not just stop with the trauma of Nazareth's self-examination, it goes deeper than that. It invites a critical eye to gaze at the whole question of representation through the lenses not of the object but of the subject gazing at the object. In the above instance, the question that is important is not the fact that Nazareth, Bagchi and Singh should find literary meaning but rather one about who decides where they should find their meaning as literary practitioners.

In an interview with M. G. Vassanji, the answer to this question articulated itself when I asked him whether or not he is affiliated to the Black African dominated and patronized Associations of African literatures and their conferences (Makokha, 2005b). His response, which can be taken as representative of the unspoken shared feeling amongst the Asian African writers, was:

> I do not like academic conferences; and I find that most of these are organized by Europeans and Americans; to them (this is my feeling) an Asian just doesn't belong to the Africa they have conjured up; they have their money and positions and their coteries of Africans. On the other hand, I go to my Dar or Nairobi, identify with the landscape, be it dry grass or a hut, enjoy speaking Kiswahili or simply drinking *chai* [tea] in a *banda* [café] and listening to banter; and no one there, especially in Dar, even asks me where I come from. And when I speak Kiswahili, the manner of my speech identifies me immediately as someone of the land. What need do I have of a conference? (Makokha 2005b, p. 42)

Vassanji's feeling is not unlike the one articulated by Mr. Majid above when he questions the "deficitness" of his intersitiality and the uneasiness by both Blacks and Whites to acknowledge Other voices within the multiracial spaces they co-exist in. The fact that Vassanji does not fit neatly into already acknowledged framework within which the African writer,; the male African writer and his authority are defined, makes a case for the need of an alternative authority with which to interpret and legitimatize ones' own identity and craft. Indeed the image of the Asian African in

East African societies has always been of an unfavourable kind. This is not just because of the exclusivity that the Asian African cultural heritage propagates. It is more because of the dominant image of the Asian African as nothing else but the stereotypical *dukawallah*, always waiting for a moment to con the naïve Black African. Once more Jagjit Singh's poem, "A Portrait of the Asian as an East African," supplies a vivid summation of the tension between the *dukawallah* and the Black African in the postcolonial dispensation, " Black blood of freedom/ Will soon break your bent shadow/ For you were the criminals of commerce/ That daily sucked their coins across the counter." (p. 158) The same victimage suffered by the entire Asian African community because of its commercial proclivities based on the *dukawallah* stereotype led (Naipaul, 1978, p. 111) to say, "nowadays, the Asian is portrayed as little more than a miserly *duka*-wallah who incessantly exploited and cheated innocent Africans. His past distorted, he is in the process of being eliminated from the present."

Actually, (Sarvan, 1976; 1985) has argued that indeed, images of the Asian Africans, men mostly, in East African literature tend to be of a stereotype kind. He supplies a critique of Black African writers from East Africa, showing how they enter the same Othering practices that they claim to be engaging. In one instance, Sarvan questions the limiting view employed by many Black Africans in representing the Asian Africans. Rather than seeing a migrant people, with complex identity crises struggling to adjust to the transfer of authority from a White Self to a Black Other, most Black Africans tend to see the *dukawallah* and his emasculating habit of emptying the Black man's wallet and coffers. Yet, it is true as (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66) points out that the stereotypes a major discursive feature in the ideological construction of otherness. The fact that most Black Africans understand [or attempt to do so] the Asian African community through the *dukawallah* stereotype because of their veiled desire to name and therefore understand this other Other that is not white/not quite. This point is well captured in the following confession by (Ngugi, 1968), "I do not know very much

about the Asian community, but I think they are also affected by the land [Africa]. It is more than material; it is not just because of its economic possibilities, it is something almost akin to spiritual." What is clear from these two assertions is that the Asian African man is indeed a part of the generic African manhood, only that whereas the Black African man is the potent part of that manhood, the Brown African man appears to be the deficit part of the same. However, it is a fact that Asian Africans are commonly or popularly known in East Africa as an entrepreneurial people with ancient commercial proclivities. This explains why the *dukawallah* image with its deficit masculinity is the most prototypical image of the Asian African peoples of East Africa. The *dukawallah* is actually the window through which the culturally different Asian African community is made knowable to the Black Africans. Bhabha (1994, p. 162) in fact points out that "questions of cultural difference face us with a disposition of knowledges in a distribution of practices that exist beside each other" that has to be negotiated rather than dismissed.

The authority of that deficit masculinity evident in the *dukawallah* image can be understood not through a dismissal of its stereotypical usage. On the contrary, it should be understood as a disavowal of the tendency to employ it in its fixity and uncontextualized form. In other words, the cultural difference of the Asian African community should not be wished away or ignored but built upon and demystified. It is for this reason that the authority of deficit masculinity is understood as a crucial point in attempts to surmount the incommensurable meanings and judgements produced within then process of transcultural negotiations between races in East Africa. It is with a sound knowledge of the foregoing that M. G. Vassanji has re-interpreted the disposition of knowledges founded on the *dukawallah* stereotype as a disjunctive site in his reputed literary works. Consequently, he has emerged in the recent past as East Africa's most authoritative author of Asian African deficit masculinity. Vassanji has pursued the same popular mode of representation

subsequently creating perhaps one of the accurate portraits of the *dukawallah* figures in East African literatures in the character, Nurmohamed Pipa. Pipa, a typical Asian African male, straddles both the narrative worlds of *The Gunny Sack* (1989), *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and to some extent *Uhuru Street* (1992). He is a *dukawallah* figure but with a difference. He is not a flat, stock or fixed *dukawallah* like Karen Blixen's Choleim in *Out of Africa* (1937), and Ngugi's Ramlagoon Dharamashah in *Petals of Blood* (1977). Pipa is a *stereotypical* but *contextualised dukawallah* figure whose actions and character cannot be isolated from the contexts that make him, and other members of his Asian African community, realistic and humane.

Although it is impossible to ignore the role Asian Africans as traders have played in the culture and history of East Africa as a geopolitical space, one crucial point must be acknowledged. Vassanji as a member of that community in general and a member of a specific trading sub group within the homogeneous Asian African umbrella appears to be a more credible author of its cultural difference. The convincing and historicized Asian African characters who are the main characters of his novels are based on experiences of his own migrant Ismaili community that originated from Western India. This community appears through fiction as the Shamsi community in his early fiction set in East Africa. It is this meticulous and ambitious literary agenda to create new images of the East African Asians that forms the aesthetic fabric of *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *The Book of Secrets* (1994). The novelist's literary mission, seen in the creation of Pipa, is guided by the commitment to examine and illustrate the complex process that (in)forms the *dukawallah*-stereotype as a discursive site where transcultural (in)diferrence is negotiated using the categories of race and gender. Subsequently, Nurmohammed Pipa is imagined as an authoritative symbolic vehicle that articulates the various discourses of power, marginality, diasporality, migrancy, and dispossession. Vassanji then proceeds to authoritatively undermine simplistic depictions and knowledge of his community as a congenitally

exploitative group of *dukawallahs*—a community out to emasculate Black Africa by putting tentacles of petty entrepreneurship in all areas where money can be found in East Africa.

This narrative technique of creating truer images of the Asian African community by re-interpreting the *dukawallah* character is crucial. It ascertains that indeed postcolonial writers such as M. G. Vassanji normally develop their artistic and social vision through re-casting misunderstood aspects of their personal and communal identities. It also excites the possibility that central characters such as Pipa are agents of narrative politics, when viewed as characters based on popular stereotype. Moreover, such characters are also authorial devices to help readers interpret the angst bred out of that sense of deficit masculinity common among migrant populations in most postcolonies. Let us pursue these observations further by now shifting our focus to the protagonists of two of Vassanji's less-studied novel: Vikram Lall in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and Nurdin Lalani in *No New Land* (1991).

1.3. Symbolism and Deficient Masculinity in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003)

In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), the reader is acquainted with two characters who serve as portrait of these workers. One of them is the protagonist's Indian paternal grandfather and the other his grandfather's best friend, the African Juma Molabux. In 1903, the undertaking of constructing the railway was successfully accomplished. Not every foreign labourer from India decided to return to the area he had come from. Some chose to stay in this colony and settle down in various urban centres such as Nakuru, the main setting of the first part of the novel, which had sprout up along the railway. This is true of Vikram's grandfather. Their offspring and

descendants were born into this colony so that Asians in East Africa held remarkable positions and worked in the wholesale shops and retail trade businesses they had set up beside being employed by the government in the construction industry as well as lower cadres of the civil service. Because of the fact that Asian traders had contributed immensely and visibly to the development of the colonial state and its economic structures including expansion of the money economy, they were easy targets of stigmatization by the African governments after Independence (Rothermund, 1965). This historical reality forms part of the source of Vassanji's narratives in this novel.

In the course of the novel Lall, becomes the personified stereotype of a corrupt and money-blinded Indian. What also matches the comparison between novel and reality is the fact that in Vikram's childhood his father is a merchant son of an ex-railway builder who runs "a provision store" (p. 8) in the small colonial settler town of Nakuru. The Lall family lives in this town in the Asian section in a home "consisted of four rectangular buildings on either side of a small street, each with adjoining homes and servant quarters at the back (p. 30). Nakuru today is still an important town in the agricultural province of Kenya set in the deep Rift Valley and is a major train terminus between Mombasa and Kisumu which lies diagonal to Uganda across Lake Victoria. The centrality of the railway in this novel as outlined above brings us to the concerns of this sub-section.

It is argued that the railway carries a special meaning in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003). It is on the one hand a symbol of Asian-African identity and a bridge that connects them to the lands of east Africa in general and Kenya in particular. On the other hand it is a metaphor for exploitation and emphasizes the tragic development of the main character, Vikram Lall's personality. In order to proof this thesis, let us examine certain passages from the novel which serve as representative arguments in favour of this interpretation of the Kenya-Uganda railway as treated in Vassanji's novel.

Vikram Lall takes the position of the first person narrator who tells his story in retrospect from an exile location he is in somewhere in Canada after escaping arrest due to economic crimes committed in his homeland, Kenya. He describes his childhood memories with the same innocence that he uses when introducing the reader to his gradual slide into financial, political and moral corruption. And even in this early childhood he offers us, already he hints at his knowledge of the fact that he is a different individual in the context of the multiracial colonial society he has been born into. As a child and on different occasions he notices that he is somehow different from his friends the European Bill and the African Njoroge. He says, for instance, "…both Bill and Njoroge were genuine, in their very different ways; only I, who stood in the middle, Vikram Lall, cherished son of an Indian grocer, sounded false to myself, rang hollow like a bad penny."(p. 48).

This acknowledgement becomes a clear hint to the corruption and financial misdeeds in which Vikram, as a cherished associate of African politicians, who exploit his business acumen and "Otherhood" to involve him in their dealings, becomes entangled as an adult. The citation also alerts us to the worries about the questions of identity that are at the core of Lall's character development and characterization. Much early in the novel, Lall "recalls his (Njoroge's) being different, in features, in status" from himself (p. 25). He continues remembering "I was also aware that he was more African than I was. He was African, I was Asian (…) I was smaller, with pointed elvish ears, my skin annoyingly 'medium', as I described it then, neither one (white) nor the other (black)." (p. 25). From these two citations, the reader understands that Lall feels disoriented as an Asian in his surrounding dominated by the majority African population and the ruling European elite. As a Punjabi Hindu, in terms of ethnicity and ancestry, he is not an indigenous an African as Njoroge yet Kenya is the country of their birth both.

Desperately, he looks out for signs that grant him justification to feel as African as his friend and this becomes a major theme in the first section of the book, this yearning for an authentic identity. Finally on page 59, the reader encounters Lall's powerful identity anchor: the railway. It is the railway that brought his grandfather and his peers to Africa, to Kenya, where he later settled, married and had five children, one of them being Lall's father. He also fantasizes at the prospect of his grandfather having sired children with the native Maasai women as had his grandfather's bosom friend, Molabux. That way he would have had blood relatives among the African ethnicities that populated this settlement and ultimately felt that he was tied to the land both by birth and blood as was the case of Njoroge. Lall knows that "his fantasy has partly to do with desperate need to belong to the land I (Lall) was born in (p. 59). The railway which was built in cooperation with African and Indian workers serves as the symbol of the connection between Africans and Asians in the post-construction era. It is a visual image of what justifies Vikram's claim to the land in a country which does not perceive him as a son of the soil.

In Chapter 9, the Lall family makes a trip to Nairobi by train, the capital city of the colonial state, just as it is now to the republic of Kenya. It is a very special experience for Lall. Totally fascinated and full of enthusiasm, he recalls impressions which almost overwhelm him when riding on the train:

> How can I describe that feeling of looking out of the sliding window above the little washbasin, as the small second-class jostled and bumped along the rails, and taking in the deep breaths of that cool, clean air and, simply, with wide hungry eyes absorbing my world? (Vassanji, 2003, p. 105)

Vassanji uses a number of stylistic devices to provide the reader with a very authentic illustration of Lall's perceptions. The novelist uses, for example, anaphora such as "small second class", "cool, clean air" and "with wide hungry

eyes" to create a rhythmical sound pattern across the text reminiscent to the movement of the train. This anaphora also evoke a feeling of speed and seem like a rapid string of images that fly by like scenes as Lall looks out of the train window. Moreover, the reader can identify onomatopoeia. The written imitation of sounds that Lall hears in this moment described above, can be found in phrases such as "looking out of the sliding windown" or "jostled and bumped along the rails." The present participle forms: "sliding", "taking", and "absorbing" stress even more the feeling of fast movement and enable the reader to share the experience of Lall aboard this train of old.

This particular train ride exerts such a strong impression on him that he claims to be able to "conjecture" as he reverentially writes, "the scenes outside the train window "at any time of the day or night (p. 105). The passage reads on, "I would see, feel, and experience it in similar ways so frequently in my life; in some essential way it defines me. This was my country – how could it not be?" (p. 105). Throughout the novel, Lall is denied claim to an African identity. This happens in the early part of the novel dwelling on childhood as is the case with his friend Njoroge who regards him as part of the Asian population in Nakuru and its "alien" and "inscrutable" ways (p. 87). It also happens later in the novel when Lall is an employed adult. His boss Paul Nderi affronts him by saying that Indians can take advantage of both their countries (Kenya and India) that they have slyly their "feet planted in". A painful comment to a man who felt that he too belong to Kenya and never thought of India as his country in any way. So Lall responds angrily thus, "'We people', as you call us, don't have a place anywhere, not even where we call home" (p. 292).

It is really on the train which is able to transport people and goods because of the railway tracks that Indians like his grandfather have laid, that Lall can truly feel that Kenya is also his country as a person of Indian ethnicity. His ancestors

have contributed to this region of Africa by building its structures, transport and economic, first, on a negative note during the exploitative era of colonialism but second, on a positive note where these enduring structures served post-independence countries. Thus the railway serves as a medium which helps Lall to perceive Kenya as his country and base of identity and with it in mind he feels his identity stabilize.

It should be noted that Vassanji makes a strong statement by integrating another stylistic device into his texts in this novel namely, juxtaposition. He describes how the Lall family "gawks" into restaurants with signs that have "Europeans Only" written on them (p. 108). These clear depictions of the racial discrimination of the colonial society in Kenya is juxtaposed with next-door the "Railway Club fete" which was "open to everyone" even though it "was actually for the benefits of Asians and Africans" (p. 108). The railway here appears as a symbol of non-discrimination, especially between the two subject-peoples. The train or the events of the railway club appear to suggest that equality is accepted in both whereas the hotels and restaurants are metaphors of social demarcation based on racialism and racism.

Several passages exist in the novels that attest to the symbolic importance of the railway as a marker of identity and metaphor of unions across the racially and ethnically diverse identities. Those mention above come from the first and second part of the novel. A third illustration is now drawn from the third part of the novel, "The Years of Betrayal." The first chapter of the third part of the novel reveals to the reader that apparently fortunate changes have happened in the life of the now adult Vikram Lall. He is "newly hired at the Ministry of Transport" (p. 234) in a newly independent Kenya. He loves his work and enjoys to inspect "lonely stretches of (rail)track on rarely used, almost forgotten routes" (p. 242). One time, he meets an African couple, Janice and Mungai "on the northward

branch line that goes from Nakuru to Solai" (p. 242). Lall develops a special relationship to the couple to which he will also turn in times of great danger. As he is more and more woven into political corruption emanating from the government under whose ministry he works, as well as the political turbulences of the 1970s in Kenya, he seeks peace and shelter in their company, far away near a dead train station. The "simple primitiveness" (p. 362) of their place is a comfort to him. This hide-out in Kenya before he bolts into exile gives Lall the chance to consider his life-history and perilous predicament in that moment. Hunted by political enemies and state agents, there is no place that he feels safe in, other than close by these old railway tracks.

Nonetheless, it is not the moving passages in this section of the novel or the railway that the reader sees through the eyes of Lall but it is the powerful imagery of the dead station at the end of an unused railroad/route here. Because he has become too much part of the evil government he has substantially helped to nourish, he cannot rely on these once so comforting associations of this ancestral symbol, a symbol of good. Therefore the absence of peace and stability of mind in this place of ancestral meaning destabilizes not just the psyche of the protagonist but also his identity too. Lall increasingly appears as a person who has not only failed himself but also failed the land he has struggled to form allegiance to and finally has failed his test to belong (pp. 358-362). The dead-end trail of the railroad at this dead train station is a harrowing indication that he is unworthy to cling to the values and virtues it used to resonate to him in his earlier days of innocence, childhood and youth. It is this scene that underscores the deft nature with which Vassanji has handled a difficult topic and a complex genre, *Bildungsroman*, in a manner that offers profound emotions to a perceptive reader.

In this novel aptly titled, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), M. G. Vassanji reveals to us that along with an unappreciated sense of belonging felt by

immigrant communities or their descendants in given lands, comes a deep and unsettling dissatisfaction with one's sense of identity and the insecurity ultimately fuels the destructive streak in some people, many normal people perhaps, when it becomes a form of lifelong disorientation. However questionable the morality of the character Vikram Lall may be as a man, as a human being, as a citizen of his country, it is his authentically depicted coming-of-age and quest for identity both ethnic and otherwise that the reader witnesses in such an intimate manner throughout the novel enabling he/she not to entirely condemn the protagonist. The symbol of the railways and its role in cross-ethnic friendships as well as in the development of the narratives of the novel is one that cannot fail to be appreciated in a close reading of this work, definitely one of Vassanji's most adroit portrait of Indian masculinities in East African contexts.

1.4. The Individual versus Society: Nurdin Lalani's Struggles in *No New Land* (1991)

In his second novel, *No New Land* (1991) M. G. Vassanji establishes a multidimensional construct of the immigrant experience made by the fictional Shamsi community that stands for the Ismaili community the author comes from; the community that comes from East Africa and whose members have emigrated into Canada and other parts of the world. *No New Land* (1991) is the first novel by Vassanji set outside East Africa after his first novel, the Commonwealth Prize-winning *The Gunny Sack* (1989) was based in East Africa with parts set in Tanzania and Kenya during the colonial and post-colonial eras. In *No New Land*, the novelist concentrates on the experiences of members of the Ismaili community, fictionalized as the Shamsi community but now shifts his focus to the experiences of members of this community who later emigrated

from East Africa to North America in general and Canada specifically immediately after independence in the early 1960s.

No New Land (1991) is a novel about an Indian family that relocates from Tanzania in East Africa to Canada after the Africanization programs of the decolonization phase of post-independence era that affected many Indian families across East Africa (see Genetsch 2007). The family relocates to Canada in search of a new life full of new opportunities. They make their home in Toronto's suburb of Don Mills. At the centre of the novel stands the Lalani family underlining the destiny of the protagonist Nurdin Lalani. Lalani is a second-generation Asian-African from Dar es Salaam, the main city of Tanzania. His grandfather came from the Indian sub-continent but his father like him was born in Tanzania. Lalani is confronted with a number of embarrassing and uncomfortable situations, in which he does not necessarily know how to behave, when he relocates to Canada. When he moves to this new Western society with his family he tries on one hand to adapt into this new land but on the other hand he wants to keep his loyalties to the values of his ethnic community, the Shamsis that he brings from Africa. It is not easy.

Vassanji's background is similar to the cultural history of the fictional Lalani family, having also emigrated to Canada from Africa (via America), as have scores of other Asian families from Tanzania. As we have mentioned above, the novelist considers himself an African Asian (or Asian African). His report about the tribulations of Nurdin Lalani taps from this similarity but is not necessarily a word by word representation of the two as copies. *No New Land* (1991) shows us the difficulties that could appear by being an immigrant in a host land with a culture that differs much from one's own home country.

The protagonist of the novel of the novel, Lalani after a long journey arrives with his wife Zera and his two childred Fatma and Hanif in Canada, where other members of the Shamsi community have already settled down; initially, he is full of

hopes and expectations about a bright future in the multicultural and prosperous city of Toronto. However, soon he has to find that the process of acculturation and assimilation to Canadian society is not easy to accomplish. Vassanji uses the character of Lalani to develop the theme of an individual who has to struggle and find a place in a society different from the one he was born into but who eventually fails to do so. In this intriguing novel, we see that this failure to adapt is grounded on social as well as individual reasons. In the following discussion, we will firstly elaborate on social shortcomings such those discussed by (Genetsch, 2007) in Canada before focussing on Lalani's individual issues that might cause difficulty in adopting a new identity in society.

1.4.1 Entering Canadian Society

In search for an identity in Toronto, Lalani encounters grave conflicts between him and the Canadian society. His difficulty, according to a study of the novel by Vera Alexander, lies in "negotiating (…) individual and collecting responses to dislocation and change" (2003, p. 199). Being confronted with a culture different from his own Asian one and the African one he is familiar with in East Africa, Lalani has to redefine his already hybrid identity, which is characterized by a feeling of "ambivalent affiliation" according to Amin (1993, p. 280). This means that Vassanji uses the character of Lalani to broach the issue of the individual versus society in the ambiguous context of immigration, or more accurately, postcolonial relocation. This ambiguity emanates from the fact that the novelist has split his book into two different worlds. One is the "Old Land" that encompasses the experiences of the ethnic Indian community, the Shamsis, in colonial and post-colonial East Africa. The other encompasses the experience of this community and especially the Lalani family and its male head Nurdin Lalani, the protagonist, in Canada; a Canada in transition too.

Vassanji shows us how the split between the two lands is using a rich range of characters from this community and its individual members, notably Mr. Lalani.

In the novel, Fatima, the seventeen year-old daughter of the Lalani family has been brought up since childhood in Canada and for her she looks at herself as a second-generation Canadian immigrant and integration in this Western society is both important and normal to her. She wants to become rich and successful using the opportunity the land offers and "this is what growing up meant—making it!" (Vassanji, 1991, p. 5). She is crucial character of the Lalani family who is not caught between two worlds, old and new. She stands for the migrants who integrate with ease to new host lands by shedding away the mindset of the homelands they hail from. The absolute opposite of Fatima is her mother Zera. Looking at Zera we can see that she is the second character from the Lalani family who is not caught between the two worlds either. However, for her she rejects the mindset and influences of the host country and retains almost entirely the mindset and values of the homeland (Tanzania) where she hails from. To her the world of Canada is just like the one she left in East Africa because she does not acculturate into the foreign culture choosing to live in her traditional and religious private world at home and among similar conservative members of the Shamsis of Toronto. She lives in Toronto her life as it was in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania while paying minimal attention to the new society and values around her now.

The one who stands between the view of both Fatima and Zera is the male protagonist Nurdin Lalani, the father and husband of the home. His life is caught in-between his past in Dar es Salaam and his present in Toronto. The novelist shows us how in Dar es Salaam, the protagonist is the middle-son of his father's family always living under the repression of the later. This is the place where his ethnicity and traditions are anchored as well as the place where he married Zera in a traditional, religious Shamsi way after the latter was chosen for him by a religious/community

leader. Toronto and its neighbourhood of Don Mills where he currently lives and where several members from his ethnic group from Dar es Salaam live too is the opposite influence to his character. It is the place of modernity and cosmopolitanism; A place that is a far cry from the conservative backgrounds of Dar es Salaam in Africa.

When he arrives in the new country, Canada, with its promise of multiculturalism as its state policy, Lalani meets challenges that are so difficult to face because they emanate party from social shortcomings that arise out of a policy that is not working. The protagonist, escaping the disillusionment faced by members of the Asian community after the dawn of Independence in East African countries in the sixties is quite eager to gain ground in Canada. He eagerly tries his best to settle down and succeed in the new Western environment but we see issues such as racial discrimination and other forms of prejudices hinder him and ultimately work against his optimism.

Migration to the Western world is almost always viewed as move towards success and prosperity in life. This case is made clear to readers by Vassanji in *No New Land* (1991). Lalani has to suffer profound humiliation as he searches for a job in Toronto. He is repeatedly asked not for his professional experience but his "Canadian experience" which obviously he does not have having just arrived in Canada. He has big problems finding a job as the novel progresses. His problem apparently is not the lack of qualifications but that he is overqualified for the jobs available leading to the line, numerous times, "Perhaps you are overqualified sir…" (p. 48). Lalani eventually gets a job but he keeps shifting from one to another citing racism. A scene in a coffee shop where he worked illustrates this point, "Nurdin soon realized that the two women regarded him as nothing more than a servant, keeping him as far as possible from the counter where they sat chatting when not serving" (p. 86). In the novel, we learn that racism is not just a theme at the job it is also current in the streets, at train and metro stations as well as bus stations. The instance is cited where an elderly

member of the Shamsi community from Dar es Salaam, currently living in Toronto, is attacked at a station by three Canadian guys, "Esmail, punched in the stomach, had been thrown down and was crying in horrible, pathetic moans" (p. 96). Because of this social challenge and many others, the protagonist steadily descends into depression. It becomes an inner conflict that haunts his days. He starts to question and doubt himself, his personality too as he asks, "When does a man begins to rot?" (p. 82). He has to accept menial jobs to survive and to provide for his family with the basic human needs. Not being able to find the job that equals his professional experience acquired in Dar es Salaam in East Africa, Lalani finds himself being edged to the edges of society, feeling useless, depressed, alienated and humiliated. Finally he does find a stable (but still unworthy) job in a hospital with the help of his new friend Romesh.

The covert and subtle racism aside, in the end the novel arrives at its climax when Lalani himself is the subject of a false racist accusation that highlights the hostile atmosphere he finds himself in the new land. He is accused at his place of work of having attempted to rape a Portuguese-Canadian woman. Alarmingly, Lalani has not even touched the girl but gets immediately arrested and even suspected of other crimes that have not been solved in the city so far. Besides, the behaviour of his colleagues, natives of the country, shows that their image of the postcolonial immigrants is one based on stereotypes, regrettably:

> "I'm not going to serve this rapist!" she said, turning away. "I thought in this country a man was innocent until proved guilty," said Romesh, to no one in particular. "Where he comes from, both his hands would have be chopped off," announced Mrs. Broadbent. (Vassanji 1991, pp. 179-80)

As it is clear in this encounter, and importantly so, the acts of racism are not targeted against Lalani as an individual rather it is to the immigrant as a figure, a community of postcolonial immigrants. This illustrates, as does the novel itself, that there is a high

amount of stereotypes and prejudices of all sorts that are aimed in this society against a racially-different and visible minority represented by the likes of Lalani. As Genetsch (2007) puts it, Lalani assumes the "vulnerable status as a visible minority" (p. 49) where no native individuals are visible, apparently because of assumed racial homogeneity of their community. The critique presented by the novelist here is that the stereotype as a discursive figure is an important weak point in the whole discourse of multiculturalism or unity in diversity and its attempted enactment as a postcolonial state policy. The stereotype comes so handy for keeping the population divided. So while immigrant culture and its difference is isolated and triviliazed, the individual who embodies it becomes inevitably marginalized and as Neil Bissoondath argues, "will never truly belong." (Vassanji 1991, p. 45).

1.4.2 The Role of the Shamsi Community in No New Land (1991)

The role of the Shamsi community is significant considering Lalani's individual shortcomings in society. It seems that the enclave that is the Shamsi-dominated, immigrant, Don Mills-Rosecliffe Park complex, in which his family operates from functions as a protection area against an "alien society" (Genetsch 2007, p. 43). On the one side, the community is very useful to its members by "providing help-lines and social structures" but on the other side, line in the case of Lalani, it is "affecting the necessary process of negotiation" with the host culture. (Alexander 2003, p. 200). This is so much a case in the way that "collective responses take longer time to redefine themselves" thus delaying the individual's dialogue with and integration to the Canadian society (Alexander 2003, p. 200). Bissoondath (1991) even states that in the novel the community almost suffocates the individual and "Nurdin never really appears in front of us." (p. 45).

Lalani's repositioning in society is quite ambivalent; throughout the novel we can see that he is indeed influenced by a modern and secular lifestyle and that this

affects his personality and behaviour as a man of Shamsi and African upbringing, in fact as a person. Indeed these external challenges he faces as an immigrant in Canada get internalized and this marks the degeneration of his character in several ways as the novel progresses. When he feels that there are changes in him that he cannot reconcile with his religious beliefs, he gets plagued by inner psychological turmoil. Significantly, his wife's hostile attitude towards his perceived changes as they settle in Canada as well as his father's strict and conservative upbringing of him consistently haunt him driving him into malaise.

An example suffices here to illustrate this state of affairs. When he meets Romesh, a cosmopolitan and liberal immigrant who helps him get a stable job at the hospital where the rape allegations take place, the ambivalent Lalani starts to undergo a character as well as moral change. He starts to sin by going against his strict Muslim upbringing and conservative values he was raised in back in Africa. With his new, liberal friend, the protagonist's hidden desires, long prohibited by tradition and the society of his childhood, are let out. First, a Muslim by faith, he tries pork in a Hot Dog not on his own volition but that of his friend. He had done it and that was the first act of many to come signifying a changing Nurdin Lalani. He is haunted by the thoughts of the piece of pig inside his body as his wife, for strange reasons, torments him unsuspicious of his deed with the advice, "Eat pig and become pig" (p. 128). With this act, Vassanji shows that the protagonist, who for long had retained the values and mind of his home country, was now slowly, unwillingly, being changed by his new location. The old values and mind that had offered balance and stability to him as veritable sources of his identity, masculinity included, were now under threat from forces beyond his control. It did not stop at the eating of pork, he started consuming beer too and visiting sex peep show shops and ultimately starts an affair outside his marriage with another woman. Here we are reminded of the emotion the protagonist felt in their journey from Tanzania heading to Canada. As they flew over Egypt, he

"felt a certain foreboding, felt vaguely that he was making a crossing, that there would be no return." (p. 33).

Paradoxically, although the immigrants depicted in *No New Land (*1991) encounter many hardships in Canada and have deep memories of Dar, they do not consider going back to East Africa. As Asians of East Africa, they have no image of a homeland, an ethnic or ancestral homeland in Africa, they hope return to, and want to therefore ensure they make it in Canada. Of the ethnic Shamsis in Toronto from Dar, it is only the baker Esmail, the victim of racism mentioned abovem who moves back to the old city and finds his peace there. So living as a fraction of the many immigrants of Toronto, the Shamsis form a microcosm of their Tanzanian community at the Don Mills-Rosecliffe Park complex. Maintaining their cultural conventions, these immigrants continue to live like in their former countries and form their own haven, separated from the outside world. For example, chapattis (flat bread) can be smelled in the corridors of the apartments and children can be seen wearing their religious gowns heading to their Quranic classes. Thus Lalani does not fail to notice that even though is snowing outside "you step out in the common corridor with its all too real down-to-earth sights, sounds, and smells, and you wonder: *This*, Sixty-nine Rosecliffe? And you realize that you've not yet left Dar behind" (p. 60). Here in this corner of Toronto, the Shamsis as a community attempt to cling to their old style of living, to their old world, and have thus "recreated their community life in Toronto: the mosques, the neighbourhoods, the clubs, and the associations" (pp. 170-1). Here the novel appears to differ with Genetsch (2007: 44) who in studying the novel, describes that the Shamsis's "cultural practices are not translated but simply transplanted to a new cultural context." This is so because the narrator informs us that this effort by the Shamsis to transplant their culture and society to the new world and recreate the old one did not necessarily yield the needed results.

It is in the example of Lalani, one individual of a cornucopia of different immigrant experiences of the ethnic Indians of Tanzania who relocated to Canada that is indeed expatiated. He exemplifies the negotiation of one's world as the sphere or scene of his life and action (p. 3). Characterized by his father as a "good for nothing" (p. 19), he seems to be the "ordinary, simple, immigrant man" (Vassanji qtd in Kanaganayakam 1995, p. 132). He is an underachiever in Dar and has difficulties in finding work in Canada. He is the "middle one, neither here nor there" (p. 169) and stands between one brother who made millions in the diamond business and the other who gained them in the black market.

Although Canada offers him "superficial pleasures like an electronically equipped apartment" (Alexander 1994, p. 201), Lalani faces new challenges as we have observed above. He feels worse than in Dar and "had come down in self-esteem and expectation, grasping whatever odd jobs came his way, becoming a menial in the process" (p. 88). As Genetsch (2007) observes, the protagonist lives "between two worlds, neither of which provides the harmony of a life that the mind imagines and craves for…" (p. 42). His struggles to resist the identity-changing social forces and realities of the new world and stick to the stability offered by the old ways, fail.

1.4.3. Conflicts Concerning Religious Values

A very important factor that segregates Lalani from society is his moral system that has been imposed on him by his conservative upbringing as a member of the minority Asian and Muslim, Shamsi community in the East African city of Dar es Salaam. This conservative core value-system is maintained by the community's strict members no matter where they migrate to in the world. As already pointed out the Shamsi is a group based on the Ismaili community Vassanji himself hails from. Its members conform to a certain set of religious values that inform their moral system. At least they are brought up in this context especially those of generations that grew up in the

colonial times in East Africa. We see in the novel that the protagonist, unlike his wife Zera, has never really been keen on participating in theological discussions; he simply knows what rules he has to follow, and until the arrival of his family in Canada, conforms quite well to these duties of the community:

> It has been simple, life in the family, the community, so long as you did not question it. (…) Barring a few phantoms of thoughts, he has been satisfied. But now he felt tremors of change inside him, and new yearnings. (Vassanji, 1991, p. 84).

However, getting in contact with Canadian culture, he more and more succumbs to desires awakening in him while he is busy getting along in his new life. When he meets his old friend from Dar, Sushila, he restores a friendship with her that has erotic intentions although in the end nothing happens between them. This relationship is so delicate because of the fact that Sushila is not any more a member of the community. She is a widow and this coupled with her change or religion makes her untouchable according to Lalani's religious conviction.

Apart from that, his friend Romesh introduces him, as we have seen above, to liberal aspects of Canadian culture. He makes Lalani eat port and goes with him to peep shows. Both deeds are forbidden by the protagonist's conservative moral system and religion too. As far as his position is concerned, this behaviour might be an indication of his gradual assimilation. But his conscience shows that he is in a severe conflict having to operate between and counterbalance two different value systems: "In any case, he, Nurdin, had eaten *it* – he could not make himself name "it" yet – and perhaps that is where the real rot began, inside him." (Vassanji, 1991, p. 128).

As a result, Lalani's moral attitude is quite ambivalent, and thus the affiliations to society and his community are quite ambivalent too and not easy to define. Furthermore, the hybrid identity he assumes seems to cause isolation and disruptive

inner conflicts to him as a character in the novel and as a person in the life-world of the novel's story; these conflicts penetrate and in fact fuel his characterization. Alexander (2003) explains:

> In *No New Land*, Vassanji draws particular attention to the importance of imagination in constituting identity by portraying a character whose imagination bars him from coming to grips with real life: that is, a character who becomes a victim of his own imagination (p. 208).

And the fact that Lalani in a way is kept from gaining foothold in a real life implies that he is kept from gaining a foothold in society too.

1.4.4 Familial Conflicts

As far as the individual shortcomings are concerned, from the example of Lalani, we can easily discern the importance of the individual' psychological condition when it comes to issues of adaptation to a new environment against the background of postcolonial discourse. As a matter of fact, Lalani's psyche is affected by his position in the family which turns out to be quite unfavourable.

Already in his youth back in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, he was described by his father as "good for nothing" (Vassanji, 1991, p. 19). He escaped from him by working as a sales representative for the region, thus having to travel a lot. The job was provided to him by his strict and patronizing father who had influential links with the leadership of the Shamsi community in Dar. The influential man at the helm of that leadership is the ominous character referred to in the novel as the Missionary. It is in fact this leader in collaboration with Lalani's father who later choose the wife he was to marry, Zera. In the novel, the readers follow quite well the influence of the protagonist's father, the embodiment of his conservative upbringing, even though he is mostly absent. This paternal phantom haunts and

affects the protagonist's personality and character in a very self-denigrating way. The protagonist as he exists in Canada is routinely plagued by his father's disdain towards him; a strong memory from the past that keeps intruding his mind. Indeed the recurrent issues with his father show that no matter how people leave or depart from their pasts in search of new lives, "problems will always re-emerge in any new location, and thus people will be doomed to a hopeless nomadic search for peace." (Alexander, 2003, p. 203).

Moreover, in addition to his past and phatasmic preoccupation with his father's memories, Lalani suffers from his wife's contempt and rejection, a fact that further deepens his identity crises. His self-doubts increase even further not being able to fulfil his role in the new land as a competent breadwinner, an able male leader of the house-hold. Genetsch (2007) informs us that, "The fact Zera finds a job erodes his identity as husband and father." (p. 48). The crises deepen into their home that becomes "a place marked by antagonism" according to (Alexander, 2003, p. 211) as his children reject everything linking them to their African and Shamsi pasts. His daughter is so busy making a new life and identity for herself as a Canadian to follow her religious duties whereas his wife neglects him as she pursues with utter devotion the same religious duties as if, according to the protagonist, she was "wedded to God" (Vassanji, 1991, p. 175). Lalani is left alone with his problems and he feels useless, his masculinity or sense of it diffuses with each passing day rendering it deficit in many ways. His family, his last bastion of his identity as a man, as a person, fails to offer him the stability and comfort that the new hostile land denies him too and his desolation requires no further description.

1.5. Conclusion

It is clear from the general discussion in this chapter, Vassanji acknowledges that, "my stories are about individual characters, but they must be seen in the context of their community" (Mutahi 1991, p. 13). Throughout his literary practice, this committed East African novelist has attempted to challenge their subjacent status within the postcolonial equation. They have realized literature in the postcolony is a complex system; it defines relationships between different peoples, groups, and institutions. This realization is captured in Vassanji's own self-defined literary agenda, "I have tried to define a certain kind of East African Asian, to create a mythology which applies not to a nation as in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's case, but to a minority which does not know where it belongs" (Mutahi 1991, p. 13). Vassanji alerts us that indeed there is a diversity of Asian Africans in East Africa. To hegemonize one image of the community—the *dukawallah*—is not sufficient. That image emasculates the complexity and variety of Asian Africans as an African community by propounding the generalisation that all members of that community do nothing other than engage in commerce; malpractised commerce at that. This is true but not accurate.

Asian Africans in East Africa have contributed in various ways in the making of East African states, especially, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. We have had nationalists such as the Karimjee brothers in Tanzania, Pio Gama Pinto, Markhan Singh and M. A. Desai in Kenya, and Sugra Visram in Uganda. We have had astute trade unionists such as Chanan Singh who later rose to become a *puisine* High court judge in Kenya. We have had renowned industrialists such as the Mehta family in Uganda and the Chandaria family in Kenya. We have also had renowned scholars such as Yash Pal Ghai and Dharam P. Ghai from Kenya besides Issa Shivji of Tanzania and Mahmood Mamdani from Uganda among many others. Yet the admirable contributions of these admirable people remain an occluded area in the space of East

African history or intellectual discourse. One wonders: to what extent will Othering of the Asian Africans change were more and more Asian African characters appearing in East African literary works to be built on or drawn from the lives and times of Asian African figures mentioned above?

Such an endeavour will not be an unrealistic literary (ad)venture. There have been early attempts to deconstruct the stereotypical and emasculating view of the Asian Africans as simply a money-loving migrant community in East Africa with no desire or need to belong. These attempts mainly by the Asian African writers of the 1960s gave rise to such non-*dukawallah* male protagonists such as D'Souza, a government official in Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle*; Shamser, a teacher in Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow*; Sunil, a motor mechanic in Sondhi's *Sunil's Dilemma*; Salim Juma, a teacher in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* or Pius Fernandes, a History teacher in Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets.* The authority traditionally found, especially in the teacher subject-position in African masculinist postcolonial literature is evident in East Africa in the early fiction of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. While in Black African writings, the teacher-subject position contests the illiteracy and inferiority claims brought against the Black African person; in Asian African fiction it disavows the dominant populist social perceptions of Asian Africans as simple conniving *dukawallahs* or entrepreneurial descendants of coolies.

By making both narrators in *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *The Book of Secrets* (1994) teachers, the epistemological authority of the story telling and the storyteller are celebrated. In this way, Vassanji emphasises that truly *post*-colonial writers and their communities should use their own literatures both to understand their complex cultures and to create continuity with their pasts also appears in the writings of other Asian African writers. In other words, when the potency of History, written by the dominant, fails to record all the transcultural pastness of East Africa's past and

present, Literature becomes an essential channel for creating a historical consciousness.

However, it is in his fictions that give primacy to the "dukawallah" figure, namely *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and *No New Land* (1991) that questions of Asian African identity hinging on discourses of masculinity are well elaborated. This was the particular concern of this chapter. Through our close-reading of the representation of the protagonist of *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), against the context of Asian African literature and discourses of masculinity, we derive several important observations. The articulation of diasporic experience in Asian African literature, as is done throughout the literary works of M. G. Vassanji, can empower the masculinities present within that community. Insights into the deficit masculinity of Asian African men can be found in the myths of their colonial past as Vassanji has recently demonstrated through the mercantilian Vikram Lall in his recent most novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003). In keeping with this view, our study in this chapter reiterates that the masculinity signified by the powerful *dukawallah*-stereotype is a central definitive aspect of Asian Africans in East African nations and narrations. This stereotype in East African literature, just as Ngugi admits serves the purpose of providing a kind of knowledge of the Asian African man who is largely an enigma to the Black and White communities in East Africa (See also Ojwang', 2005). In general, Asian African writers employed a variety of techniques to interpret their experiences at the interstice between the margin and the center of the colonial and post-colonial states in East Africa. Often they seek to express, through men with deficit masculine identities such as Nurmohamed Pipa, how the political and cultural hegemony of imperial Britain and later East African nation-states has affected their own psychology. However, these writers differentiate themselves from their Black African counterparts by going beyond fascination with British imperialism and its legacy. Rather, they commonly seek empowerment and newfound agency by

setting up binarisms such as the center/margin pair and then using their works as authoritative vehicles to deconstruct such damaging assumptions.

With respect to *No New Land* (1991), we have observed that Lalani is the perfect example of an individual who feels that "his social surroundings are in a process of erasing his identity." (Alexander, 2003: 219). His general lack of confidence, a key aspect of deficit masculinity, is expatiated further when his feeble childhood is compounded by an adult life abroad mired in new difficulties that upset all his stable senses of identity. Both his Canadian society and his own community (family included) add to his gradual feeling of alienation by showing lack of respect and support. Vassanji's characterization of Lalani is a perfect illustration of that postcolonial theme of "in-betweeness" especially in the context of transnationalism and diaspora discourses. Although he has family and community around him, Nurdin Lalani comes across as an isolated and lonely man, a victim of forces forming his identity far greater than his own internal nature. The various forms of ambivalence in his life result in the construction of a double life. On one side the tragic protagonist one finds honest desires and longing for liberation and quest for success as well as optimism whereas on the other hand are the constraints of tradition and society whose forces are far beyond his control. Conflicts due to racism, religious conservatism and a dysfunctional family hinder the protagonist from performing his identity as the head of his family and a useful member of the community and society at large. They hinder his masculinity rendering it deficit in certain ways, as described above.

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2

CHAPTER TWO

Identity, Theme and Narrative Aspects of Binyavanga Wainaina's *Discovering Home* (2002)

2.0. Introduction

In 2002, the Caine Prize for African Writing was awarded to a long short story, a novella by a young Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina. The story, *Discovering Home* (2003) has since been re-published by Jovian Books in 2006 in an expanded version. Wainaina is currently the executive officer heading the Chinua Achebe Center for African Writers and Artists at Bard College in New York. This novella has been central in the promotion of his career but its win was influential in a much deeper way. With the money that he received as the winner, Wainaina set up the Kwani? Trust that has over the past decade established itself as a factory of new Kenyan writing and talents. It is Kwani? Trust that publishes annually the only magazine of creative writing in English across East Africa today. It also runs the annual Kwani? International LiftFest in Nairobi and the Kenyan coastal town of Lamu since 2005. What is most interesting is that the inaugural issue of the *Kwani?* journal published a story in 2003 that won the Caine Prize that year, making the prize go to Kenya on two consecutive years. This second story is the subject of the next chapter after this one.

In this chapter we focus on Wainaina's *Discovering Home* (2002) and examine issues of identity, his thematic treatment as well as aspects of his narrative design,

namely, the strategies used to produce the narrator of this complex and sweeping yet intriguing work. In the sub-section dwelling on narration issues, we shall use the new version of the novella published in 2006.

2.1. Background Setting and Exploration of Kenyan Identity in Wainaina's *Discovering Home* (2002)

> When I left, I was relieved that I had escaped the burdens and guilts of being in Kenya, of facing my roots, and repudiating them. Here I am, looking for them again. (Wainaina 2002 p. 3)

The purpose of this sub-section is to expatiate on the question of identity in Wainaina's novella. The Berlin Conference of 1884, where Africa as a continent was divided into "spheres of influence" which, later became colonies and territories and much later independent nation-states, was the birth place of modern African identities especially in the 20th Century. For many decades the colonial powers, mainly from Western Europe, imposed their culture, education and religion on different ethnic communities across their territories. This was done at the expense of the existing traditions and languages that were spoken by the different ethnic communities in a given territory or colony. The anti-colonial movements and the voices of nationalism inevitably made culture and identity two of the central pieces of their arguments and struggles. The restoration of dignity to the colonized masses was to be pursued inter alia via cultural decolonization and the revival of the languages, histories, mythologies and even religions of the ethnic communities of Africa. However as the new quest to rewrite what it meant to be "African" intensified, challenges emerged because different ethnic communities had different pre-colonial pasts and this posed a challenge to the new nation-statess that emerged primarily after 1960.

Moreover, during the Berlin Conference of 1884, borders of the so-called "spheres of influence" that were inherited by the colonial states and later by the nation-states had been drawn arbitrarily without paying attention to the distribution of ethnic communities and the pre-colonial boundaries that separated communities from each other. Defining post-independence identities of African communities that now found themselves straddling two different nation-states, hence bearing two different nationalities, posed an even greater challenge. In East Africa, for instance, the Maasai community found itself both in Kenya and Tanzania. Their political identity in the context of the Cold War became sundered even more with Kenya opting to align with the West and pursue capitalism as its roadmap towards decolonization and nation-building whereas Tanzania opted to embrace the East and pursue socialism. The Maasai, an ethnic community famous for its rich cultural heritage that makes them icons for the tourism industry in East Africa, found themselves now defined as either Tanzanian Maasai or Kenyan Maasai. The inclusion of these two adjectives to their Maasai ethnic identity marginalised the role of tradition, culture, and history in the pre-colonial Maasai concepts of community and identity. Across Africa, recent times have seen the return of these pre-colonial concepts as individuals and communities, tired by postcolonial disillusionment, marginalize their national identities as they assert their ethnicities in the wake of a resurgence of ethnic identifications (see Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: Geschiere, 2009, Warzinek & Makokha, 2011).

In Binyavanga Wainaina's *Discovering Home* (2002), the unnamed protagonist, whose biography uncannily resembles that of the author as we have noted above, experiences a process of redefining what his identity means to him. After ten years pf studying in South Africa, the narrator like the author returns to Kenya at the turn of the millennium to visit his family. He leaves South Africa with the goal of travelling around Kenya for a year. It should not be lost to us that this is the time when the

dictatorship of retired President Daniel Arap Moi came to an end precisely after the presidential elections of 2002 where the opposition defeated his party and preferred successor. His party had ruled since independence in 1963. Most Kenyans, exiled or living or studying abroad were overcome by a sense of euphoria, a positive euphoria, and many returned home as was also the case of Ngugi above who returned home in 2004 after 22 years of exile and protests against Moi's totalitarian rule.

We are told that the narrator in *Discovering Home* (2002) does not just have roots in Kenya but also in Uganda. He is arriving in Kenya from South Africa but his stay will include a visit to Uganda to attend his maternal grandparents' wedding anniversary. On his journey to Kenya, his home country, he discovers that his home has become alien to him during his many years away and he has to rediscover it as he rediscovers himself. This motif of rediscovery is what underlies the plot of this novella. Set at the turn of the century, the novella is a veritable depiction of the Kenya of the early 2000s, awakening from 24 years of totalitarian governance, grand corruption, bad governance and a crumbling economy. Through his visits up and down the country and even his trip to Uganda, we are made privy to these realities. We are also informed about the traditions of different ethnic communities whose homelands are places that the plot takes us to as we follow the itinerant protagonist on his various trips. The differences between the urban and rural environments and cultural habits are also expatiated for the reader. All these views and perspectives entrench in a subtle way the multiplicitious nature of African identities seen from various standpoints: cultural, ethnic, national, political and economic. This is one of the successes of this novella and in its grand and sweeping nature, the reader readily grasps that the identity of the protagonist is inextricably linked to the placeness of his homeland(s).

As it has been pointed out, the novella displays close similarities to the biography of the author himself. Wainaina was born in 1971 in Nakuru, Kenya's

fourth-largest town. It is this same town, a former capital of the White settler community in Kenya, which we met in the first chapter of this study as we read Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003). He then left in 1991 to study Commerce in South Africa. He did not return back to Kenya until 2000. This is the year his mother died.

As we shall see in the concluding sub-section, the novella is written out of the I-Narrator perspective. The reader follows the narrator's thoughts and actions which are presented in a stream of consciousness. We learn little about the details of the protagonist's life but we are told that he had to leave Kenya because of it was being ruled by "a one-party dictatorship" (p. 17). His self-exile (or exile by choice) in South Africa, as a student, slowly transforms him into a stranger to his own motherland after a period of ten years. At the same time, the exile enables him to have a distant and objective look at his country of birth as well as, later, the country of his maternal grandparents. He cultivates what one can call an insider-outsider's perspective to both Kenya and Uganda. In this role, he can also be described as a silent observer. He documents what he sees on his journeys, meticuluously, sometimes criticizing subtly and sometimes praising the beauty of his country: "…the landscape had grabbed me with such force it sucked up the awareness of myself for a moment." (p. 30).

These comments are made when he returns to Kenya. Similar comments are made later when he travels to Uganda for his family reunion at the anniversary of his maternal grandparents. Observing the beauty of Uganda he says, "this country gives me hope that this continent is, finally, not incontinent." (p. 42). This latter statement expresses his concern about the welfare not just of the country but also of the continent at large. This is typical of the young set of writers who emerged in the 2000s such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Doreen Baingana, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor; a writer who we shall look at in the next chapter of this study. The same is also true of young people across Africa as has been observed by this researcher during his trips

home or his research trip to Uganda and Tanzania. Young people in Africa today are both concerned about matters in their countries and also about what is going on across Africa and indeed the world. The young characters portrayed as protagonists in the preceding chapter on Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) above also attest to this point. We see the protagonist of Wainaina's novella frequently referring to himself and the people he meets as "we Africans". (p. 31). Here it can be argued that he refers, in essence, to Africa as an entity and demonstrates at the same time Africa as a multiplicity of national identities as well as individual idenitities.

One important part of a national identity is culture. And we see a wealth of commentaries on the arts, music and literature accompanying us via the protagonist throughout the reading experience. They form important aspects of culture that help the protagonist rediscover his homeland. Changes that have happened in his society during his absence are measured against the trends in the three cultural aspects drawn from various examples across Kenya, and later, Uganda.

For example we are told of the colourful murals painted on the public service transport vehicles, commonly called, "Matatus" in Kenya. These matatus are painted by "real artists" (p. 9) who are devoted to their art work of decorating the vehicles because "Art galleries in Kenya buy only the expressions for which there is demand in Europe and America." (p. 9). The decoration of the matatus therefore is a serious indictment to the economic aspects of culture that exists in a neo-colonial Kenya. This point that underlies the nature of artistic production in Kenya is one that Ngugi has raised several times too (See Ngugi, 1972, 1981).

The local decoration of matatus is contrasted against the Westernized import that is Hip Hop music when the narrator informs us about the loud music being played inside the public service vehicles as entertainment to the passangers: "Hip Hop blearing out of the speakers…" (p. 9). The irony of the moment, and it emanates from the society itself too, is that much as the protagonist emphasizes the importance of the

local cultural aspects he also points out the local and the global are now intertwined in the nature of modernities informing African societies today. The juxtaposition of local art and global music inspired by the African Diaspora in the United States shows how, due to colonial history, Western and African cultures have mixed and formed the prevailing culture of the day in Africa. He shows this point in a manner that is accessible to readers beyond the sophisticated theoretical discourses that expound on this point. Moreover, by stating the situation of the artist in Kenya, the narrator subtly criticises the state of the art in Africa where local talent goes unrecognised internationally as demand in Europe and America of African art rely on stereotypes of, from, and about what African culture really means.

A second example can be drawn from the realm of music. It pervades the narrative of *Discovering Home* (2002). On one of his journeys across Kenya, the narrator listens to a song from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) whose music is popular across East Africa and approves of it describing it thus, "Congo music, with voices as thick as hot honey…" (p. 13). He shows how important the traditional music is to him on other occasions where he cites music sung in vernacular. He does not have very good words for African music sung in English. While at a party once a song of the type is played and it "makes me insist that we are leaving." (p. 28). Even more ridiculous is his description of the people dancing to the song:

> All these proud warriors (…) are at this moment yodelling in unison with the music, hugging themselves (beer bottles under armpit), looking sorrowful… (Wainaina, 2002 p. 28)

When demonstrating this dense variety of the arts and music in Africa, the protagonist does not give a devastating prognosis of the downfall of African culture. His observations are almost always descriptive. What he calls "bubblegum music" (p. 18) is a new part of his home culture as well as the traditional Congolese music. Other

aspects of the oral tradition are also mentioned and these include myths and urban legends. They come out via conversations he has with his fellow characters across the country at different stages of the plotline. And it should not be gainsaid oral literature is an enduring aspect of written African literature across the continent, and even in Diaspora. It is this oral tradition and its infusion into writing that distinguished written literary texts from Africa and Europe, for instance (see Irele, 2002 or Lindfors, 1973).

There is a picture on the wall of his parent's home in Nakuru that deserves mention here. The picture is accorded a lot of space in the novella. It is an important device in the enhancement of the narrative and plot of the story. It is an old picture of an indigenous woman of the Nandi ethnic community that has been on the wall of the corridor since his childhood. The community and its relatives call Nakuru and its environs their ancestral homelands having lived here before the coming of colonialism.

When he arrives from South Africa, the picture has changed, or rather he has changed and his appreciation of it is different and interesting. The narrator has been fascinated by the picture since childhood. The painting reflects an African tradition, ethnic identity, which the narrator himself does not fully understand. He belongs to the younger and "modern" generation of Africans born well after independence. For this reason, the painting is mysterious to him and used to frighten him when he was young. Now he finds it both exotic and desirable at the same time. When he later notices its "Mona Lisa smile" (p. 15) on the Nandi woman's face, he realises that his romantic ideas of African traditions are as false as the smile on the face of the woman. The portrait that during his childhood looked absolutely African and from the pre-colonial heritage, turns out now to be a work of art by a European artist using an African ethnic woman to capture the Mona Lisa motif differently. Its purpose is obvious: tourist attraction.

When describing the painting, the narrator again finds African and European elements intermingling: "The artist has got the dignity right but the sexuality is European." (p. 16). The narrator treats the picture like a real person. He explains to the lady in the painting why he had to leave Kenya:

> When I left, white people ruled South Africa. When I left, Kenya was a one-party dictatorship. When I left, I was relieved that I had escaped the burdens and guilts of being in Kenya, of facing my roots, and repudiating them. Here I am looking for them again. (p. 17).

When discovering his roots, the narrator is confronted also with traditions in his country, from other ethnic communities, that seel alien and unacceptable to him. He amuses himself while discussing the cultural practice among the Maasai women that allows them to take any lover they choose a few months after having given birth (p. 34). However, he is shocked by the practice of female circumcision that is still prevalent among the Maasai even in the new society he finds himself in after his return from South Africa. As has already been pointed out, the insider-outsider perspective of a citizen returning to a home country after extended absence enables him to make certain insightful, though not always objective, commentary on the manners and issues in Kenya. As he describes the topic of female circumcision with old uneducated Maasai women and young educated ones, both who support it, he underscores the necessity of breaking with some African traditions that are retrogressive and orienting those that are productive into the future. Through this instance, Wainaina points out how on one hand his country is mingling current Western and African ways and at the same time retaining aspects of the old African ways and practices that clash with modern concepts of identity and social values. Suzzana, the educated Maasai girl the narrator talks to who underwent willingly female circumcision and defends it is one "who must have a Tupac T-Shirt stashed

away somewhere." (p. 37). Reference here is being made at one level to the slain American rapper of the 1990s Tupac Shakur, an icon to many young African lovers of Hip Hop music, and at another level to the ambivalence of being modern and old all in one. It is this cultural ambivalence that is definitely the spirit informing contemporary identity in Africa today whether communal or individual, according to Wainaina.

The difference between and comngling of different cultures is not just drawn on the plane of Africa versus the West. It is also drawn on the plane of the rural versus the urban. Both commingle with each other and further intensify the complexity of cultural ambivalence in Kenya, Africa even. The novella starts out in the urban areas in Cape Town briefly then Nairobi followed by Nakuru. It begins with a description of the chaos of bustling urban life in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, infamously called sometimes "Nairobbery" (p. 43) due to its high crime rate, especially under the reign of the Moi dictatorship. The city is described as hectic, loud; an unkempt concrete jungle made up buildings, vehicles and humans. All this is shaped by disorganised traffic and all forms of financial transactions. However, the narrator states, "It's good to be home." (p. 10). As the novella unfolds, the protagonist moves deeper into the rural areas of Kenya and much later, Uganda.

Part of the strategy that makes this novella a veritable commentary on social and national identities in East Africa is the fact that the protagonist concentrates on, or rather is mainly interested in, the people he meets. This is particularly so about the people he meets in the rural areas. Having already defined himself as an educated, young and urbanised African, he is more interested in the rural people. He engages with members of the indigenous ethnic communities of the places he visits such as Ukambani where the Kamba people live to the east of Kenya and Maasailand to the south of the country. The trips are punctuated with commentary on oral and cultural traditions. There are several evenings of story-telling and the sharing of personal life

experiences between the characters as well as between him and the other characters. Through the voices of the people across different parts of the country we see major themes affecting the society and the nation emerge, for the benefit of the reader. Social problems such as unemployment, poverty, government corruption, imprisonment, AIDS and prostitution are tackled by Wainaina in this subtle and clever writerly manner.

What makes this writing strategy a success is the fact that the protagonist, as noted earlier, always takes the role of a passive interlocutor in such conversations. In fact his stance is credible due to the fact that he has been away from the country and can barely comment intelligently about its state of affairs. By letting the people themselves speak out on the issues touching on their lives and relegating the protagonist to silence, Wainaina invites the reader to appreciate these issues as well as this method of finding out about the troubles and issues affecting African people. For one to discover Africa, whether as a foreigner, a citizen or someone returning frome an extended leave abroad, listening to people across all manners of social divide is the way forward. This is what Wainaina in *Discovering Home* (2002) and Ngugi in *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) seem to be saying together.

With this strategy, the narrator moves on in the novella to question the romanticised view of Africa portrayed by expartriate writers such as those who came from the settler community in colonial Kenya; the likes of Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley. The protagonist says:

> Whenever I read something by a white writer who stopped by, or lives in Kenya, I am astonished by the amount of game that appears for breakfast at their pations and the number of snakes that drop into the baths, and cheetah cubs that become family pets. I have seen five or six snakes in my life. I don't know anybody who has ever been bitten by one. (Wainaina, 2002 p. 31).

Wainaina acknowledges that interest on game and the environment of the continent is as important as that on the people and their diversity too, if not more. The cultures and identities of Africa differ not just between countries and societies but also between ethnic communities too that occupy a common country.

This observation is one of the foundations upon which this novella is written, and should be read. The story moves us from country to country and from place to place within one country. Starting out in South Africa, the protagonist's journey takes place mostly in various parts of Kenya. It ends in Uganda close to the borders it shares with Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is here in this liminal borderland that the family reunion happens in the midst of family members who come from an ethnic community that lives in the three countries. The reunion of the family as they come from across East Africa and even abroad to witness the anniversary of the protagonist's maternal grandparents is described proudly as a union of diversity. After the Kenyan members of the extended family, who include the protagonist, arrive in Southern Uganda at the ancestral village he tells us that, "In two days we feel a family. In French, Swahili, English, Kikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Kiganda, Ndebele, we sing one song, a multitude of passports in our luggage." (p. 51).

It is not only cultural ambivalence but also cultural diversity that is celebrated as the foundation of the Africa of the Wainaina generation. His novella is a testament to this submission. The nature of an authoritarian regime that used ethnic favouritism and totalitarian politics had driven the narrator away from home and lowered his ethnic sense of self, negating it in fact. However, the return from exile coupled with the time away from the homeland consolidates his need to rediscover both nation and self. To do so he embarks on that proverbial journey or the journey motif that helps him document the diversity of his country, its social problems, economic situation, political background as well as his own shifts in identity. Identity, he realises and so do we, is always in flux and is as multiplicitous as the times we live in today.

2.2 The Narrator as a Youth in a Changing Society in *Discovering Home* (2002)

In Wainaina's novella, he tells us a coming home story of a young student from Kenya who studies in Umtata, South Africa, and returns to his mother country for one year to travel around and work. Finally he meets his family in Uganda to celebrate his grandparent's 60th anniversary. The narrator and author have the same first-name and they have a lot in common. There is no clear line between author and narrator. We can assume that the author assimilates his experiences and knowledge he gained while studying and living in South Africa in this novella. One of the most significant and interesting topics, which were discussed in this story are, on the one hand, his lifestyle and the way he celebrates life and does not take anything really serious – about hedonism. And on the other hand, it is about a young man, who comes back home and suddenly realises how much he has changed while having been away and that he finally became mature – it is about growing up and changing.

We see in the novella, the protagonist changing his attitudes as a result of his travels both across the countries as well as within Kenya. Immediately in the first chapter of *Discovering Home* (2002), it becomes obvious, that the narrator does not really have any serious problems in his life, even though the introducing sentence: "there is a problem." (p. 7) seems to claim the opposite. His problems are all about his drunken friends, who locked themselves in the bath, or about running out of alcohol. Already the fact that he starts his story by telling us about his party makes the reader think, that pleasure and fun are the most important things in his life. In the following sentences it becomes clear, that the protagonist feels very comfortable and free in Umtata, as he says: "[Umtata is] a place that has let me be anything I want to be and provided not a single predator." (p. 8). He feels safe and got used to his modern

lifestyle, not having any rules and limits. Besides, it was a "hangover" (p. 8) that nearly made him miss his flight.

Later he divides the Kenyan people up into two different groups. On the one side there are those people who "wear third-hand clothing" and "eat dirt" (p. 14) and the people on the other side are "impossibly exotic", they are portrayed in "coffee-table books" (p. 14) and in fact Kenyans of the second group are not as many in number as assumed. He describes the second sort as very modern and western orientated and regards himself as belonging to that group. They lead an extravagant life and might even be irrational and unreasonable as they "refuse [...] to realise that somebody cut off the water" (p. 14).

In the next chapter of the novella, he finds a job through his father. He is sent by the government to get the farmers to start growing cotton again. Together with a driver he makes his way to Mwingi in eastern Kenya. Initially one thinks he takes this job seriously. Even though he is looking forward to drinking beer and eating "lots and lots of goat" (p. 19), he plans to leave early in the morning to finish his work first. But when he discovers an intriguing sign on the side of the road, he rejects his plan and follows the sign: "I am curious and decide to turn in and investigate." (p. 19). He excuses himself by saying, he has to check first what the "Cotton Growing Situation" (p. 19) is on the ground, but actually he does not intend to make any enquiries.

Finally the protagonist and his driver end up in a pub, drinking beer. When the government area chief enters the pub, the protagonist tries to talk about cotton, but the topic is brushed aside. He does not make any efforts to change that. They talk about alcohol and women, and afterwards the chief, who is Kamba by ethnicity, claims that protagonist's people (presumably the Gikuyu, to whom the writer belongs) "know nothing about having a good time" (p. 21). As a result of ethnic honour, the protagonist decides to rescue the reputation of his Gikuyu community amidst this jolly group of Kambas to whom Mwingi Town is part of their ancestral home and orders

more beer. At midday, together with the chief, they set off to the District Agricultural Office, but only stay briefly, before they leave and get something to eat. The chief wants him to stay at his house for the night and even though he feels uncomfortable and rather would take a rest, he accepts the offer. This is very typical for him, he often tries to do his duty, but is not strong-willed enough and finally ends up not doing his work, getting drunk or going to a party even when he is "determined to refuse" (p. 23).

That night, when the protagonist and his driver are taken to a party by the chief, he feels free and relieved. It seems like dancing and drinking makes him forget about his daily problems and all the trouble in the world. He has a lot of fun and enjoys the party, he even forgets about time. The music and dancing arouses a feeling of ease and unity inside him: "...this is everything that matters [...] We affirm a common purpose..." (p. 26). Indeed he calls it "a moment of magic" (p. 26), in which "everything seems possible [...] and free of consequences." (p. 26).

The protagonist feels comfortable, like most of his countrymen, ethnicity notwithstanding, when politics and serious topics touching on identity are discussed under the cover of night. It seems like the dark of the night allows them to say things they could not say during the day. There is no one, who demands an explanation from him; he can be whoever he wants to be - not having any responsibility. This chapter, as well as the scene at the beginning of the novella gives us the impression that always when the protagonist is at a party, he feels happy and carefree. In those moments he can totally relax and switch himself off. He is a dreamer, dreaming about the impossible. Those situations seem to make the unreachable a little bit more tangible to him. The next day he is brought back to reality, waking up with a bad headache in the late afternoon. Kariuki, the driver, is lying next to him, still sleeping. The probability of them working that day is quite low - another lost day. All in all, one can say that the protagonist is a person who enjoys life and embodies the lifestyle of a youthful

generation. Nevertheless, this does not mean that he is inconsiderate or does not take any kind of responsibility. He likes to be in a group with different people, but at the same time he needs his own space and thinks about different problems and topics while he is alone. He has two sides, which, at the first look, seem to contradict each other, but actually fit together quite well.

Let us shift our focus squarely now to the topic of growing up and changing with respect to the protagonist. The narrator lived and studied in South Africa for many years. As mentioned earlier, Umtata in eastern South Africa is the place, where he can be the person he wants to be. There is no one who tells him what to do. In addition to that, modern South Africa is more liberal and Westernised than his native conservative and ethnicity-ridden Kenya. According to all those indications and also the fact that he went to Umtata on his own as a young student, he changed a lot and became more mature.

When he arrives back in Kenya and takes the bus from Nairobi to his home in Nakuru, a song is played in the bus, which takes him back to a childhood memory. He remembers the moment when he heard the song the first time and describes it in detail, it sounds as if it was a magic moment for him. One can imagine that this song had an immense impact on him and was engraved in his mind. He says that he was annoyed by that song, because it "derail[ed his] daydreams" (p. 13) but afterwards he adds that "It doesn't any more" (p. 13). The song has no special meaning to him any longer. His consciousness changed, he has grown up and is not the boy when he heard that song the first time. At the beginning of the next passage the protagonist meets his mother and thinks she seems frailer. In his eyes, she looks different than before, his perception changed he can now look at his mum as a human and not only as his mum. He says: "...my attempts at maturity make her seem more human." (p. 13). Living far away from home changed his consciousness of his family and friends, he has seen a lot

and is an adult expected to shoulder responsibility now. He has developed a lot and consequently changed.

The next example for his attempts at maturity is probably the most significant one in the entire novella. Let us take a closer look again at the scene mentioned in the sub.section above. This is the scene where he describes the painting of the Nandi woman and what it means to him. It is the painting on the wall of the corridor in his family's house and it followed him his whole life, he has grown up with that woman. When he was a child, he was terrified of her, because her "eyes seemed so alive" (p. 14), they looked at him menacingly. Later, in his teens, he kind of adored her, even in a sexual way. Shortly afterwards the painting was moved to his bedroom, he describes a "terrible fear" (p. 15) that he could never love her. Feeling attracted to a woman, who does not exist made him sad and desperate.

Over the years he distanced himself from her and those thoughts. On his return home, he can now look at her in a friendly way. But today everything changed because he too has changed. He looks at that painting and is astonished about what he sees now. The protagonist finds: "...for the first time I realise that the woman's expression is odd." (p. 16) It seems like he never before understood the painting, his whole childhood and youth he was under the illusion that this is an African painting, but he now knows it is not. He knows an African would not paint a woman like that. Indeed it is "Mona Lisa['s]" (p. 15) smile that made him notice his mistake. This excerpt shows, he did not only grow up, when he was in South Africa, he also changed.

This changing is not only about him getting a different perception, but also about his knowledge, he is well educated, knowing Mona Lisa. Further, he has a very modern point of view, when he later talks to Suzanna, Eddah's sister while on a different trip to Narok in Maasailand to the South of Kenya. He is very surprised about the fact that she wanted to be circumcised and does not plan to go to university to study. It is hard for him to understand her way of thinking though they are both

youths from the same country. Their ethic backgrounds are different. The importance of education as well as the equality of men and women seems to be elementary to the protagonist but not so to the girl.

The narrator is a very circumspect person, he is a cloud-traveller and often does not know what to do and where to go. He says himself that he has never "mastered the landings" (p. 48), he is somewhere in between his dreams and reality. Nevertheless at the same time he managed to "face [...] his roots" (p. 17), he is old enough to look for his identity and ready to tackle his background. A short while ago he tried to escape the burdens of his origin, but he can take them now. Even though the protagonist likes to go to parties, drink alcohol, does not always take his job very seriously and is a day-dreamer, he is reliable, when is depends on him. After spending many years in Umtata he gained an outside point of view; he knows Kenya better than foreigners, but has problems understanding the Kenyan people, their point of view and way of life, he alienated from his native country, but still sees it as his home. He has grown up, became mature and can handle the past and the cruel strokes of fate of his country now. He wants to know about his origin and find his identity. Summarizing, one can say, the story is about a young cosmopolitan man, who travels back to his roots and family and tries to discover his home again. We shall now critically highlight aspects of narration as they are reflected in *Discovering Home* (2006), the new expanded version of the novella.

2.3 Aspects of the Narrative Mode of *Discovering Home* (2006)

Binyavanga Wainaina's *Discovering Home* (2006) is not just interesting from the thematic and chracterization points of view, but in terms of its form also. Indeed the three may be what made it the winner of the 2002 Caine Prize for African Writing. Looking at the praises emanating from the jury (and published inside the book and on

its cover), this long short story (or novella) is roundly praised for its fascinating story, the wit of the writing and the complexity of the plot. Many other aspects of the short story have equally received applause. Yet, the majority of the readers neglected one central element to every novel: The narrator of the story.

In this sub-section, we will examine in detail, therefore, the unnamed narrator (who is also the protagonist as pointed above) in *Discovering Home* (2006). The analysis here will not focus on the narrator's background, relation to other characters or any other aspect concerning the content of the story. The examination is rather concerned with the theoretical methods and techniques of narrating employed by the author. Four different categories for the classification of narrators will be described and explained. After each presentation of a specific category, its theoretical concepts will be applied to Wainaina's novella. The aim here is to clarify the choices the author had when conceiving his narrator and to discern, where possible and suitable, what effects the author's decisions have on the reader. To illustrate the narrator's technical procedure and mode of action, excerpts from the text will be cited. On the basis of the textual passages the implications for the reader's perception and understanding will be highlighted.

2.3.1. Genette's classification of narrators

In order to analyse the narrator of a given text, critics employ a multitude of categories and methods. In the following sub-sub-section four major categories developed by the French literary theorist Gerard Genette (see in Meyer 2004, pp. 60-63) will be presented and afterwards used to examine the narrator in the novella. The first category will be the "level of communication".

2.3.1.1 Level of communication

When examining the narrator of a given narrative text, one of the first steps is to locate the narrator on the level of communication. Two options are possible. Either the narrator is on the "level of the narrative transmission" thereby operating from the frame narrative and in this case he is called an "extradiegetic narrator" (Herman, Jahn & Ryan, 2005, p. 156). Or, the narrator is to be found on the "level of the story", telling an embedded narrative (Nünning & Nünning 2004, p. 119). In this second case the narrator is designated as an "intradiegetic narrator" (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 2005, p. 261). The question to be answered is whether the narrator in the novella is an extradiegetic or an intradiegetic narrator. The following excerpt taken from the beginning of *Discovering Home* (2006) will shed light into that matter:

> I have been studying here in Umtata, South Africa, for five years and have rarely breached the boundary of my clique. Fear, I suppose, and a feeling that I am not quite ready to leave a place that has let me be anything I want to be and provided not a single predator. That is what this party is all about: I am going home for a year. (p. 7).

From the very first page onwards the reader is confronted with a narrator who tells not an embedded but the frame narrative. What he narrates constitutes thus the story of the novella while other narratives are embedded into that story. Consequently, the narrator in *Discovering Home* (2006) is an extradiegetic narrator.

3.3.1.2 Narrator's position

A second category useful when examining the narrator of a novel "is the narrator's position with respect to the story." (Meyer 2004, p. 61). The reader is to determine whether the narrator is either present or absent in the story he narrates. Three different types of positions are to be identified. First, if the narrator is absent in the story he tells

he is called a "heterodiegetic narrator" (Abbott 2007, p. 42). The position of that specific narrator is located "outside of the story world". (Nünning and Nünning 2004, p. 119). Second, a narrator may be a character of his story in which case the term "homodiegetic narrator" is adequate (Abbott 2007, p. 42). If the narrator is telling the story of his own life or is identical with the protagonist of his story then he is called an "autodiegetic narrator" (Nünning and Nünning 2004, p. 119). This last type is of special concern for our analysis of the narrator's position in *Discovering Home* (2006) as the following excerpts will prove:

> I am at home: The past eight hours is already receding into the forgotten; I was in Cape Town this morning, I am in Nakuru, Kenya now. […] Light from the kitchen brings the Nandi woman to life. A painting. I was terrified of her when I was a kid. (Wainaina 2006, pp. 13-16)

> August 1995. A few minutes ago, I was sleeping comfortably in the front of a Land Rover Discovery. (Wainaina 2006, p. 30)

> About halfway through the service, I see somebody staggering up the hill, suitcase in hand and muddied up to her ankles. It takes me an instant to guess. I run to her and mumble something. We hug. Aunt Christine is here. (Wainaina, 2006, p. 52)

All through the novella, the narrator stays as the protagonist around whom the story is built. The special position this character occupies never changes during the narrative as illustrate the excerpts above. The locations the reader is told about such as "Cape Town" or "Nakuru, Kenya" are in close relation to the protagonist. The same is true for any event of the story: "I am at home" or "I was sleeping" refer only to the main character's acting. Since the narrator is clearly telling the story of his own life he is to be identified as autodiegetic narrator. Summarizing from this sub-section and the one preceding it, we can say that the categories "level of communication" and "position," the narrator of Wainaina's novella *Discovering Home* (2006) is an extradiegetic-

autodiegetic narrator. In the following two more categories are to be analysed, namely the degree of explicitness and the degree of reliability.

2.3.1.3. Degree of explicitness

The degree of explicitness is concerned with the question "to what extent the presence of a narrator can be discerned within the text?" (Nünning & Nünning 2004, p. 119). Two types of explicitness can be distinguished. One is the "covert narrator" who is an anonymous voice the reader has practically no infor-mation about (p. 119). The covert narrator serves first and foremost "to provide information to the reader about different aspects of the story world such as location, chronology of the action and details on the characters". (Meyer, 2004, p. 120). Since the covert narrator contents himself with creating the fictional world and reporting the events in an objective manner, the "task of evaluating the story" is passed on to the reader (p. 61). Therein lies one major difference to the opposite end of the spectrum of the "degree of explicitness" where the "overt narrator" can be found. The overt narrator is "an individualised speaker and concrete persona" (Nünning & Nünning, 2004, p. 119). The speaker of the novella fits the description of the overt narrator since he introduces himself as the main character of the story and reveals certain details about himself. What functions does the overt reader serve in general and in particular within *Discovering Home* (2006)?

Just as the covert narrator, the overt narrator informs the reader with crucial details about the place, time and characters of the story he narrates. Yet, "while the covert narrator keeps the descriptions as objective as possible, the overt narrator tends to scatter personal comments, value judgements and interpretations into the narration". (Klarer, 2004, p. 19). That is true for the narrator in the present novel. For instance, when the narrator learns about the circumcision of a young, modern and educated Maasai girl called Suzanna, he states:

> If there is a courtesy every Kenyan practises, it is that none of us ever questions each other's contradictions; we all have them, and destroying someone's face is sacrilege. There is nothing wrong with being what you are not in Kenya, just be it successfully. […] Suzanna knows her faces well. (Wainaina, 2006, p. 39)

The excerpt illustrates well the narrato's subjectivity. He suggests that Suzanna's decision to get circumcised is a "contradiction" thereby doubting Suzanna's ability to judge. Moreover, the narrator suggests that her being circumcised is just a "face", implying that the young girl plays a double game with her relatives and friends. (p. 39). More important, the narrator implies that all Kenyans play a double game for they are mere actors trying to fill out a role. These statements are as subjective as they can be. By giving such personal comments of individuals and society alike, the narrator of *Discovering Home* (2006) influences "the reader's perception of the story and guides his understanding". (Meyer, 2004, p. 61). The reader is thereby encouraged or even manipulated to adopt the narrator's opinions and point of view.

2.3.1.4. Degree of reliability

The last category classifying narrators will be the degree of reliability. Any given narrator of a narrative text can be either reliable or unreliable. The rendering of a "reliable narrator" is consistent and coherent, meaning that there are no contradictions in the narration or any "significant logical gaps" (Meyer, 2004, p. 62). The following excerpts from the novella, however, will underline the unreliability of its narrator:

> We are now so far from the main road, I have no idea where we are. (Wainaina, 2006, p. 24)

> For some reason I don't quite understand, this all happens at a particular season, and this season begins today. (Wainaina, 2006, p. 34)

> […] they [some relatives] entertain us with their stand-up routines in French and Kinyarwanda, the force of their humour carrying us all to laughter. Manwelli translates one skit for me (Wainaina, 2006, p. 49)

In the first excerpt the narrator confesses not to know the location he narrates about. Likewise, in the second excerpt the reader learns of the narrator's lack of knowledge concerning cultural details about Kenya, stressing even more the narrator's limited knowledge. The finishing touch, however, is the narrator's inability to speak and understand Kinyarwanda, a Kenyan language, resulting in his dependence from a character who serves him as translator. All these aspects illustrate the narrator's lack of knowledge in many points important to the narration of the story. The narrator of *Discovering Home* (2006) is thus an "unreliable narrator" (Nünning and Nünning 2004, p. 120). Yet, the conse-quences for the reader can be very enriching. By giving a subjective account of the story, the unreliable narrator "defamiliarizes the vision of the world" and motivates the reader to rethink and reflect his views (Meyer 2004, p. 63). Since the novel is analysing the concept of "feeling home", the mention of the diversity of languages, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds in Kenya challenges the reader's concept of what constitutes "feeling being home". A reliable narrator probably would not mention the struggle to understand other characters, thereby averting the reflections and questions about society and the concept of "home". The last excerpt is thus a suitable example of why it was a good idea to use the unreliable narrator for the contexts of Wainaina's interesting novella.

2.4. Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at one of the major pieces of contemporary writing from Kenya, Binyavanga Wainaina's novella *Discovering Home* (2002) and its expanded version that came out in 2006. We have seen that the story is about a young student from Kenya who left Kenya before the fall of the Moi regime (2002) to study in Umtata, South Africa and now returns to a Post-Moi Kenya for a one year vacation. In this vacation he arranges to attend the 60th anniversary of his maternal grandparents in Uganda where his mother comes from. On his return to Kenya, he travels around the country as part of his vacation work and in this process touches on several themes that affect his country. The journeys change him too and we are then made privy to a coming of age narrative embedded in the form of a novella that is at the same time a brief travelogue. It is in this light that we raised a number of themes, which were discussed at length. It was also observed that the narrator of the story is also the protagonist of the story. And indeed this narrator-protagonist and Wainaina, the author, have a lot in common. There is no clear line between details from the biography of the author and narrator. We can assume that the author assimilates his experiences and knowledge he gained while studying and living in South Africa into his work. In doing so he has created a work of autobiographical fiction in the tradition set down by writers such as Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley.

Finally, in this chapter, we have offered an analysis of the narrator in Binyavanga Wainaina's novella. This examination has produced many interesting details about the narrative methods and techniques employed by the author. Four different categories for the classification of narrators were examined and then applied to Wainaina's novella. Doing so, some fascinating insights into the process of narrating were revealed. Thereby it became clear that the narrator of the present story is an

extradiegetic-autodiegetic narrator who narrates a frame narrative about his own life. More important, the degrees of explicitness and reliability were scrutinized in a way that the narrator can be identified as an overt and unreliable narrator who tries to persuade his reader of his opinions and value judgements. Additionally, the ways the narrator's degree of explicitness and unreliability provoke the reader to reflect and challenge prevailing norms or values were illustrated. Our attention will now shift to the final chapter of this study in which we look at a contemporary of Wainaina, who coincidentally won the Caine Prize a year after the former won it. This is Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, also from Kenya.

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3

CHAPTER THREE

Identity, Theme and Style in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's 'Weight of Whispers' (2003)

3.0 Introduction

Like Wainaina before in the previous chapter, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor is one of the new voices in Kenyan literature today (Kruger, 2009; Partington, 2006). Like Wainaina, she is also a short story writer who works with the Kwani? Trust constellation of young writers in Nairobi. Her story 'Weight of Whispers' published in *Kwani?* an influential journal of creative writing and culture based in Nairobi, Kenya won the 2003 Caine Prize for African Writing. It is this story that brought her to the limelight of African literature. Owuor has an interesting biography that has seen her move across several countries in Central, Southern and Eastern Africa thus giving her broad experience with the cultures and societies of these regions. The German critic Lutz Diegner of Humboldt University, writing an entry on the writer for the New Literatures in English Association (NELK) based in Frankfurt points out that:

> She is one of a new generation of leading Kenya writers. After having studied English linguistics and history at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, she worked for an IT company in Kenya and Swaziland before going to obtain an MA (Television and video for development) at Reading University, Great Britain (1999). She has held different positions in companies in Nairobi, Cape Town, Mbabane, Swaziland and Tanzania. A keen conservationist, she has engaged

> with different environmental issues including co-founding Wakuluzu-Friends of the Colobust Trust, based in Diani, Kenya. She became Executive Director of Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) in Zanzibar, Tanzania (2003-2005), hosts of the Festival of the Dhow Countries. Since 2007 she has been working as a project co-ordinator, academic planner and programme specialist (arts, new media) at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of the soon to be established liberal arts college that is part of the Aga Khan University. (Diegner, n.d)

Owuor has been instrumental in the mentoring of young writers across East Africa besides writing and publishing other works of fiction and film scripts. The present researcher has been a beneficiary of Owuor's support to young Kenyan writers and in 2005 was one of the participants at a writer's workshop in Zanzibar organised by her under the auspices of the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF). She was also crucial in enabling the present researcher to meet M. G. Vassanji in Nairobi and Lamu in 2006 when this researcher was undertaking graduate research on the early fiction of Vassanji. She has just finished writing her first novel, *Dust and Memory*, which will come out this year or in 2012.

In this chapter we look at her award-winning story, 'Weight of Whispers' (2003). It is a haunting story about a royal Rwandan family that flees from the Rwandan civil war and genocide of 1994 to Kenya, with the unsuccessful view of finding their way as asylum-seekers in Europe. The story unfolds their precarious and lugubrious situation in exile as status-less refugees. However, at a deeper, thematic level, the short-story, which received high accolades from the Caine Prize jury and critics alike, is one about good and evil, injustice and betrayal, love and loss, about the mere struggle of living – of existence in the context of contemporary ethnicity-laced postcolonial society. The fate of the Kuseremane family in the Kenyan exile could almost be adapted to another family from another country in another exile. If we look at the innermost sensations we are exposed to in Owuor´s story, existence, love, and

hate, we can tentatively detach from the surroundings and gain deeper insight in fundamental human feelings.

The chapter therefore, offers a thematic discussion of the short story dwelling on the issues of identity and secondly it focuses albeit briefly on the unique style that the writer uses to achieve her objective, that is, communicating her message to her readers.

3.1 Thematic Issues in Owuor's *Weight of Whispers* (2003)

'Weight of Whispers' is a short story that does not contain one main theme, but many which are interwoven. We shall focus on a number of them which serve as the fulcrum of other minor themes. Let us start with the precarious situation of refugees in exile. It is important that we take a closer look on how the Kuseremane family is dependent on the tolerance, the grace of other people. How do they try to adapt to their new situation or to escape from it but eventually they fail more or less? Many other main themes of the story – as the love of the family, betrayal, the loss of loved ones – are connected to this one theme – the struggle of existence, if you are stripped bare of existence. We shall first discuss how the human being and its character traits are displayed, mainly through the eyes of Boniface Kuseremane, the protagonist of the story and head of the fleeing family of four, including his sister, his fiancée and his mother. The story portrays the human being to be inherently mean if he or she is only allowed to. Then we will take a short look at how the title of the story 'Weight of Whispers' connects to the situation of the family in exile. Their name the 'Kuseremane', formerly a guarantor for privilege during the stable pre-chaos days, turns out to be a bane for them as they get implicated. This sums up to the third point of how the refugees, mainly the Kuseremane family, are treated in exile and how the family themselves deal with their situation. I will examine how the situation of the

Kuseremane family in Kenya proves to be and how they try to adapt to it. In my last part of the essay, I will round up the latter point by taking a closer look on how the main character, the narrator, of "Weight of Whispers" Boniface Kuseremane deals with their new situation.

3.1.1 The idea of men

In the beginning, when the impact of the genocide in Rwanda had not been known and when the family still hoped for a fast departure from Kenya, humans did not seem to be quintessentially evil. "But to be human is to be intrinsically, totally, resolutely good. Is it not?" (Owuor 2003, p. 14). As long as nothing negative happens to the family, as long as they belong to the privileged social stratum, they do not see the despair nor the cruelty of humans – only from a safe distance. But already on the day they have to flee from Rwanda, they realize that "the zenith of existence cannot be human" (p. 13). In "Weight of Whispers" it is not natural that one person helps another; it does not go without saying that the vis-à-vis is treated respectfully. The family is let down by former friends, they are betrayed in money matters, and the women have to prostitute themselves in order to be allowed to immigrate to Canada. It becomes clear that humans shortchange other, more powerless humans – sometimes it is evident that they even enjoy their power over others. "[...W]hat makes it possible for one man to hit another for no reason other than the fact that he can" (p. 13). The family realizes this power structure so drastically because, if at all, they had been the ones to shortchange others and not the other way around. According to Boniface Kuseremane, there is even a "necessity of oblation of men by men to men" (p. 13). While people try to silence the atrocities by men to men, they still exist and will always exist, because "[human...] nature relishes fratricidal blood" (p. 14). In "Weight of Whispers", human is not an equivalent to good, but rather to evil. Humans think of

themselves first, sacrifice others for their own good, or abuse others just because they have the power to. This is not only demonstrated by the story of the family in the Kenyan exile, but as well – and it could not have been more drastically neither more realistically – by the frame narrative of the Rwandan genocide.

3.1.2. Weights of whispers

The situation of the Kuseremane family even worsens when rumours about the list of génocidaires start. Their name is "accused, accursed" (Owuor 2003, p. 30). The name, which has once opened all doors, is now a heavy burden on the family. It becomes public that the Kuseremane family must somehow be related to the genocide in Rwanda. "Now tales had been added of a zealous servant instructed by an heir to wipe out the stain" (p. 31). It does not become quite clear in the course of the story if the family bears actively blame for what has happened in Rwanda, and – if they do so – realize their guilt. But people, even friends, eschew the contact with the family or react repellent, appalled as soon as they become aware of the family´s name. The whispers have finally found human voices and it makes it even harder for the family in the Kenyan exile to strengthen their supposedly promising contacts in Kenya and abroad. Back in Rwanda, their name has lost, as well, its influence. The 'weight of whispers' presses down grievously on the Kuseremane family. In the beginning, when it still seems rather easy to leave Kenya, the African continent, Boniface Kuseremane believes that these whispers, the rumours of their guilt, will carry no weight in Europe. But also at the end, when he stays alone in Kenya, he believes that, even in Kenya, "the wind-borne whispers will fall silent" (p. 36). Even though, only rumours, whispers exist, they weigh heavy on the family and influence greatly their life as refugees in exile.

3.1.3. The Situation of Exile

These previous two points are indispensable to one of the central themes of the short story – the situation of the refugees in exile. Without being aware of the importance, the weight of the whispers and without realising that a mostly negative idea of men underlies the story of the Kuseremane family, an analysis of the situation of refugees, of the family, in exile would be inchoately.

At first, the Kuseremane family does not or does not want to realize their status as refugees. They see themselves as "visitors, tourists, people in transit, universal citizens with [...] an affinity for Europe" (Owuor 2003, p. 16); they only intend to stay in Kenya shortly and thus do not try to adapt to the country nor to their refugee status. But soon, they realize their insecure status. As refugees, the do not enjoy any rights, but are exposed to the arbitrariness of the Kenyan people and the bureaucracy. "The feeling of the ground shifting beneath one´s feet. There is no one in authority" (p. 15). They are betrayed in money matters and are in constant threat of being arrested for nothing; only after many attempts, they finally obtain a Refugee Registration Number, which at least allows them a legal, officially acknowledged presence in Kenya – although this does not guard them against further harassment on the part of the police and the officials, nor does it help in getting work. One of the most important parts in the book concerning the situation of refugees in exile is a flashback which Boniface Kuseremane has of a situation in a café in the Netherlands back in times when he still was a successful businessman. A man from Sierra Leone, who sold underwear although he actually had a master´s degree in sociology, came up to him and told him: "Africans, we be overeducated fools.[...] No one sees your knowing when you has no feets to stand in" (p. 25). Back then, Boniface Kuseremane was ashamed of the man from Sierra Leone in front of his Dutch business partners, probably even disdained him. In Kenya, he begins to realize that he is almost in the same situation as the man

from Sierra Leone and understands the truth of his words. He sees that "[i]n exile we lower our heads so that we do not see in the mirror of another´s eyes, what we supect about ourselves: that our precarious existence depends entirely on the whim of another´s tolerance of our presence" (p. 25). This sentence could be seen as the bottom line of the situation of refugees in exile. They can neither obtain work nor leave the country, and are almost deprived of rights. They depend on the goodwill and tolerance of others. In exile, it does not matter what kind of educational attainment one person has achieved or how influential they have been in their homecountry; as soon as one loses his or her authority – is stripped of his or her existence – one depends entirely on another´s authority and existence. Therefore, the first lesson in exile, that the family has to learn, is to camouflage (p. 28). It is essential to know when to say what to whom. A wrong utterance to a wrong person can send someone at least to prison. It is hard to find true friends, which one can trust, in exile, because everyone is restless, scared, and alert. It is not important anymore who you are, but that you still are; "[t]o be one of many, is to be, anyway, if only for a moment" (p. 32).

3.2. The Protagonist Boniface Louis R. Kuseremane

Let us analyze now the situation of refugees in exile with a specific character, the narrator of the story, Boniface Kuseremane. Let us take a look at how he first tries to ignore the precarious situation, then to escape from it or at least to adapt to it, and how he, in the end, collapses.

In the beginning, Boniface Kuseremane is sure, that he and his family will leave Kenya soon. He does not see himself as a refugee but as a visitor. He is a prince with many contacts all over the world, and not a beggar, who is let down by his friends (Owuor 2003, p. 17). When he realizes that they might have to stay longer than expected in Kenya, he is at least sure that he will get a job with his doctor´s degree. In

the beginning, Boniface Kuseremane refuses to acknowledge their situation; he does not want to disturb his family, so he does not tell them about the rumours and does not inform them about their worsening situation (p. 20). But overall, he does not want to admit his own fear, neither towards his family nor himself, because he is too scared of it and his uncontrolled reactions (p. 18). Slowly, he begins to adapt to the situation. He realizes, what Roger, his butler, has done (p. 32) and learns to make himself invisible so that he does not stand out of the masses and make himself an easy target for the police; "I have learned of hidden places; covered spaces that the invisible inhabit" (p. 32). He turns to quiet places in order to forget his real life. While Boniface Kuseremane did not understand in former times why some things always remained unexpressed, he now "can sense why some things must remain buried in silence" (p. 13).

He has learnt that, sometimes, it is better to be quiet upon certain subjects in order to not invoke fear or ire. His own name, he himself, is accused with a horrible crime and it proves to be better for him and his family to remain silent about this subject. Although, he adapts to the situation, he slowly breaks down. He cries when he is not seen and becomes aggressive towards Lune and Chi-Chi. He cannot overcome the fact that his fiancée and his sister had to prostitute themselves in order to obtain the emigration papers (p. 29). He should be caring for the family but he cannot; he senses that "[he is] being taunted for [his] ineffectuality" (p. 29). Boniface Kuseremane blames himself for the death of his sister and cannot forgive Lune for having prostituted herself. But when his mother dies the day before they want to leave for Canada, he loses his remaining hope and strength (p. 35). He wants to stay with his sister and mother in Kenya and "live in the silence-scape and perform the rituals of return, for life" (p. 36). It is not quite clear if he wants to return to life or if he wants to perform the rituals of return for the rest of his life. It mirrors his desperate, but yet acquiescent state of mind. He wants to leave and he can finally, but after all the

struggles and harassment he has experienced as a refugee, he either does not have the strength to leave or does not want to leave anymore, because his former life has fallen into pieces – is inexistent, another life in another time – and this now is his "second life" (p. 36).

The narrative shows the protagonist as an escapist who faced with an obvious situation of need as refugee prefers to circumscribe his own and his family's status in the euphemistic terms of "visitors, tourists, people in transit, universal citizens with… well… an affinity for Europe" (p. 16). This clearly shows his reluctance to accept the unfortunate developing of the situation and expresses a message of hope. The hope, it seems, is linked not only to the resolving of the awful and insecure state of affairs for himself and his family ,but also to a desire to escape "the whispers" – horrifying visions and a mysterious, ever repeating uttering of his very own name – that haunt him day and night.

In a relatively early stage of the denouement, in which hope has not yet been completely lost, Kuseremane still sees a chance to escape the spell by leaving the continent: "Soon we will be gone. To Europe, where the wind's weight of whispers does not matter; where the wind and all its suggestions have been obliterated."(p. 19). It becomes quite obvious in this quote and throughout the further progression of the plot that Kuseremane is not only in political exile but also in what one may call an emotional exile. He is fleeing both from concrete problems, as well as from the more abstract but seemingly more urgent problem: the whispers. To mute these whispers would mean to have peace of mind, which is a rather improbable and foremost self-serving solution to the horror described in the short story.

Furthermore, we may describe this as an escape from self. Obviously, the whispers come from a voice within that bears the truth of having committed an egregious crime which he is unwilling to confess neither to himself nor to the reader. At least not very clearly; Kuseremane's narrative is structured in a desultory and

blurring manner, which hinders the reader in clearly construing the facts. Taking a closer look, however, the shor story clearly reveals Kuseremane's complicity in the affairs of the Genocide, that it is himself who beats his wife and sister, and how there is a general pattern of blaming these things on third persons, to name just the most apparent facts. The further discussion of the manner in which this blurring effect is achieved brings me to a brief look at Kuseremane as a narrator.

3.2.1. Kuseremane as an unreliable narrator

The narrative is structured in a rather desultory manner, involving several flash-forwards and flash-backs that to a certain extent reflect the inner struggle of Kuseremane. Having the protagonist as a first person narrator along with the mentioned symptoms of psychological instability alone would probably qualify Kuseremane as an unreliable narrator. However, to take a step further, one can assume that there is also a deliberate attempt to deceive the reader – facts that underline this claim of unreliability.

From the first scene on the narrator attempts to trick the reader into the belief that he is not evil. This is done by a flash-forward in time and the shifting in perspective. In a detailed account of police violence and corruption, the protagonist reveals some facts about himself and implicitly pleads for sympathy and pity: "…But now, I lower my head. The sum total of what resides in a very tall man who used to be a prince in a land eviscerated." (p. 12).That Kuseremane is a prince is one of the important facts that are revealed to the reader here while changing to the third person view. The following passage reads:

> Two presidents died when a missile launched from the ground brought their plane down. A man of note, a prince, said, on the first day, that the perpetrators must be hunted down. That evil must be purged from our lives.

> That is all the prince meant. It seems someone heard something else. It emerged later on, when it was too late, that an old servant took his obligation too far, in the name of his prince. (p. 12)

It seems Kuseremane is trying to make a good first impression in the dialog with the reader. His complicity in the affairs of the Genocide becomes more apparent further on throughout the story, whereas at this stage of the narrative things are quite successfully blurred by the shift in perspective and by laying the blame on Roger, the major-domo, who is introduced in a later passage that will provide further evidence for Kuseremane's complicity. The mentioned method of perspective shifting manifests itself as a pattern throughout the narrative. As a general rule, Kuseremane escapes to a third-person perspective when talking about the egregious things that he is unwilling to admit to have done.

This shift in perspective takes its most dramatic form in a scene closer to the end, in which Kuseremane chooses a perspective that is further outside than in previous examples:

> I am not there. I watch from afar, from the ceiling I think, as the tall man tears the papers to shreds. I am curious about the weeping woman with shorn hair crawling on the ground gathering the fragments to her chest. I frown when I see the tall, dark man lift his hand up, right up and bring it crashing down on the back of the girl who collapses to the floor…. (p. 32).

Analogously, the soon to follow comment on the beating of his sister Chi-chi once again proves the same pattern: "I remember a blow delivered on her defenceless back by a defenceless brother-prince" (p. 33). But what exactly does he mean by "defenceless brother-prince"? At this stage, the pieces of facts that the reader can use to construe the true nature of the narrator become more evident. Knowingly, it seems, Kuseremane adds "defenceless" to his self-description. Once again a call for pity and a

vain plead for understanding due to the seriously aggravated state of affairs. The evil within and around Kuseremane at this stage has become more than apparent and has even been literally named in the text.

3.2.2. Human Evil as a Major Theme in 'Weight of Whispers' (2003).

In one of the most interesting parts of the short story, Kuseremane reveals an interesting piece of information to the reader while reminiscing about a dialogue with a friend. He tells us: "I had agreed to offer perspectives on his seminal work, a work in progress he called, 'A Mystagogy of Human Evil" (p. 13). Here one can argue that the short story does not becomes powerfully self-reflective here than elsewhere in its entire plot. In fact, *Human evil* is one of the central themes of the short story and Kuseremane is the carrier of this message. On the one hand he comments on the evil deeds committed to himself and his family by the unscrupulous police officers and other ignorant people in authority, on the other his own deeds communicate vast evil potential. One of his reflections that we find at the very beginning of the story in a passage that was commented on previously gives us a good initial thought on the evil within: "Later on, much later on, I will wonder what makes it possible for one man to hit another for no reason other than the fact that he can" (p. 12). Even though at this point he is commenting on police brutality, due to the "later on, much later on" we may suggest that the given quote also involves a good deal of re-thinking of the objectionable things he will do much later throughout the story.

This duplicity once again does not stand alone in the story but describes a common pattern. It describes the constant inter-relation of the evil within and the evil around. In fact, the picture that this thought creates is well represented on the cover artwork of the story, which shows the spirit of a man and his family arising from a garbage heap and shadowed by a larger, obscured figure that is arising from the same

heap and seems to have power over the families situation. This image of the dark shadow is represented in the text when Kuseremane states that "The sun has come into the room but it cannot pierce the shadow hanging over his life" (p. 36).

By the end of the story, Kuseremane finds himself in a hopeless situation, bereft of the ground he used to stand on, so to speak. Until the very end the vindictive whispers – or the weight of the guilt within – remain present and come with a vengeance that exceeds Kuseremane's death. Obviously, our main character is paying for the evil he has done. He has paid with the loss of his family, psychic suffering, the weight of his ever-growing guilty conscience, and knows that the threatening suggestions will not fall silent until he dies. In a way, Owuor's short story thereby communicates a moral lesson amongst the lines of "what you reap is what you sew", as the initial catalyst of the downfall was one of Kuseremane's evil deeds that led not only his family to suffering but doomed the lives of hundreds of thousands. Apart from the general thought on human evil, it seems there are so many more issues that Owuor wishes to illustrate, including the situation of female refugees.

3.3. The Female Figures in 'Weight of Whispers' (2003)

The plot of the short story revolves around the male protagonist, Kuseremane but he is not the only member of his family in flight. The Rwandan aristocrat, we are told, fled with his mother Agnethe, his younger sister Chi-Chi and his fiancée Lune from Kigali to Nairobi with the view of later emigrating to France and then Canada. Owuor has illustrated the issues discussed above relating to Kuseremane but has also touched on the plight of women refugees and questions of identity around them. Indeed this story is written in the voice and from the perspective of the only male character, Boniface. This persona point of view is rewarding in a way. It makes the story more directive and more evocative of feelings around the issues at hand. This is mainly because this

point of view enables readers to have empathy for the protagonist whose internal and external mental environments we are privy to courtesy of his own revelations. However, in the general picture of one's appreciation of the story, it cannot be helped to notice that the writer does not offer much information about the experiences and feelings of the three female characters. And even though pundits can argue that the short story is a unifocal literary genre concentrating on a theme, a character, a time, a place et cetera, it is this paucity of focus on female characters that we now turn our attention to.

3.3.1. Agnethe, the Tragic Matriarch

Before the genocide came, the Kuseremane's had lived a wealthy life as aristocrats of the Tutsi ethnic group that has in the course of history ruled over the majority Hutu and minority Twa ethnic groups in Rwanda. Lune, Chi-Chi and Agnethe are used to this life of glitter and glamour. In spite of the fact that they arrive in Nairobi Kenya, as people fleeing their country, which is descending into the abyss of genocidal madness, the Kuseremane's do not perceive themselves as normal "refugees". Rather they view themselves in the light of their family life as aristocrats in Nairobi on transit enroute to the civilized world of Europe and North America where they sort of belong. They arrive complete with expensive clothes and pricey jewelry, dollars in Channel wallets and immediately check into a suite at the prestigious Hilton Hotel in the city centre of Nairobi. As they put up there for days, their critique of the local culture of Kenyans, vis a vis their grooming as aristocrats of a different African country, reveals their prejudice against their fellow Africans. Lune, for instance, does not like the style of Kenyan fashion and Agnethe does not find any jewelry available in Nairobi to suit her tastes (p. 15). At this introductory stage of the story, the writer manages to convey to the readers the fact that the four members of the fleeing family do not see itself as

refugees just yet. They consider Nairobi a transit point rather than their end terminus in the itinerary of their flight. Of course the contrary becomes the case as the story reaches its climax and they lose all their wealth in an unsuccessful bid to process their papers for travel ending up in the sheer destitution and despair that characterizes "common" refugees and asylum-seekers across Africa.

The plan of escape was based on the idea that upon reaching Nairobi, Agnethe, the matriarch, sends word to her wealthy friends abroad who in turn invite them their easing their application for travel documents in Nairobi. However, due to whispers of rumors of the perceived incrimination of the Kuseremane's in the unfolding genocide back home and hence their flight, most of these wealthy friends remain mute. And as the friends remain mute so does that desperation on the part of the stranded family deepens with their wealthy possessions being sold to carter for their upkeep in Nairobi. Agnethe keeps sending his son out to find whether responses have arrived from the mute contacts abroad. He keeps coming back with negative answers. As despair bites and their refusal to accept the reality of their situation does too, Agnethe shifts her failure from contacts who cannot be relied upon to her son. She plagues him with the responsibility of organizing their alternative flight to Europe in any manner possible. The reality of their cagey situation as people on transit in Nairobi steps in and further complicates their life. Throughout the story the line, "when are we leaving?" directed by mother to son forms a foreboding accompaniment to the tragic development of the plot. Kuseremane acknowledges that this question has become a key aspect of his mental and character degeneration calling it "a mother's ambush." (p. 16). His answer is always: soon. The reality though never discussed is known to both mother and son. They are stuck in Nairobi, a place they do not like, a place they feel they can never belong. We slowly see the health condition of the elderly woman take a turn for the worst beginning with the writer's explanation that suddenly "her hair turned grey." (p. 21). Ironically this grey does not denote the wisdom that comes with

age and situates one in society as a problem-solver or a provider of solutions or advice against problems. On the contrary it points to humiliation, desperation and mental degeneration that ultimately take the life of the stoic matriarch at the end of the story.

The family moves out of the suite at the Hilton Hotel in central Nairobi due to dwindling finances. They in fact flee the hotel in the disguise of going out and leave most of their luggage in the suite. They find drab lodgings in the poor quarter of the town along River Road, an infamous neighborhood made famous by the 1970s' satirical novels on postcolonial disillusionment such as *Kill Me Quick* (1973), *Going Down River Road* (1976) and *The Cockroach Dance* (1979) all penned by the Kenyan writer, Meja Mwangi. From these humble quarters, they move to a modest neighborhood after Agnethe gives her son a pricey ring. This family heirloom symbolizes their heritage and aristocratic background. She offers to part with the heirloom after her son's fiancée Lune offers to prostitute herself in order to bail them out of their present financial woes and also raise their tickets to Europe. (p. 30). By parting with it for sale, the matriarch breaks the connection she had to her aristocratic status and her ancestry, accepting grimly that their first plan of flight had collapsed and their friends had failed them. They were now common refugees who had to go to the local United Nations Human Commission for Refugees, like any other people seeking asylum and queue for services as well as bear the harshness with which refugees are treated by the Kenyan society.

Their trip to the UNHCR offices in Nairobi is prompted by a visit they make to church. Here they coincidentally meet a friend of Agnethe who though from Rwanda lives in Nairobi with her husband George (p. 26). The friend Maria informs them that Canada has opened its gates to Rwandan refugees but her husband confides to Kuseremane that things may not be easy for this aristocratic family. This is because rumours had started doing rounds among the Rwandans in Nairobi that the Kuseremane's name appeared on the list of those who had organized the genocide.

They were a wanted people. It is on this not that Maria and George distance themselves from the Kuseremane's and refuse to help them in any way. Of course Kuseremane keeps this information about the list away from the three female characters arguing with himself that it was better that way the better to control the panic and declining health of the family members.

Later one while working on a small garden behind the house they had rented with the money obtained from the sale of the heirloom, Agnethe suffers a mild stroke (p. 31). She gets hospitalized and her son takes care of her only to come home and find that his sister Chi-Chi had been impregnated by an Ethiopian refugee (p. 30). Matteo the man responsible for the pregnancy used to live nearby but has since fled. The sister dies in the attempt to give birth. After Chi-Chi's death, Agnethe becomes deluded and her health takes a sharp turn for the worse. She sits outside her house whether it is warm or cold and rocks to and fro. Her son tells us that her eyes "look like the eyes of a medium, she is near death."(p. 34). Afterwards Lune turns to prostitution and manages to raise enough money to buy the tickets of the three remaining members of the family to Canada. However, tragedy strikes once more when Agnethe, now a frail shadow of her former self, collapses as she packs her bags. Her wailing son carries her to the hospital not far from the house and she dies in his arms. The life she had led as a strong woman who attempted to safeguard her family and offer it safety resonates with the image of a woman who dies never having quite abandoned her honor. By succumbing to the problems she had chosen to hide in her heart rather than plague her family with, Agnethe pays the ultimate price of motherhood. This is the price of protecting and providing for one's family and offspring against all odds. It is in this regard that though she is a secondary figure in the story, she impresses us a heroine.

3.3.2. Chi-Chi, the Tragic Sister

Chi-Chi is twenty years old but she behaves like a small girl. She always calls her elder brother by the childhood name "Bu-Bu" rather than Boniface and sucks at her two fingers often. She regards her brother Boniface as her protector who in turn calls her "an instinctive contemplative." (p. 15). She has an instinct in sensing the inner feelings of people. The day they arrive in Kenya she says that the people in this country are different because she cannot see their soul (p. 17). This leads her to early feelings of insecurity and a sense of foreboding at the very beginning of the plot. Her feelings in turn help the writer develop that sense of foreshadowing about the fate that awaits the rich aristocrats as they check in at the Hilton Hotel. She is afraid of their new situation and often when they go out she says that in Nairobi, a populous and bustling city compared to her home-town Kigali, there are "many faces and many spirits." (p. 17). Kuseremane is worried about her and does not want her to leave their residence whether at the hotel, the lodgings on River Road or the house with the garden where the story ends. Chi-Chi is an introvert. Her world mainly exists inside her mind and this is the prominent character attribute she is portrayed with by the writer. With each passing day of their ill-fated stay in Nairobi, Kuseremane frets about her when he sees her eyes steadily get large, black and deep. He knows that the situation is affecting her even when she does not discuss it. In his own words he moans that "the soul of this place is soaking into her." (p. 18). The hint here is towards contamination and subsequent possibilities of degeneration and demise.

Her hopeful and cheerful nature returns briefly when thy visit the UNHCR offices and being the youngest, she is given a chance to get asylum papers before the others. However, tragedy strikes. On the day that she has been scheduled to do a medical examination, she has already been raped by Matteo and is pregnant. The only other person who knows this is Lune. After the examination, which of course will lead to the denial of her application, they come back holding hands and immediately Chi-Chi holds onto the waist of her brother, a gesture she only makes when afraid (p. 28).

After this rape happens she cuts her hair roughly as if she was hacking a hedge. Hair stands for her femininity. It is common among rape victims to do the same. The violent violation of their femininity that is rape makes victims to attack further features of the same femininity such as the hair as a way of responding to this abnormal happening. Lune tries to bring up the possibility of abortion by implying she can use her own body to buy "certain co-operation from the medical examination" (p. 29). Immediately Chi-Chi responds by embracing her body. She is reflexively afraid of further invasion of her body, which is, as we have pointed out above, her world for she is an introvert. Ultimately she dies in premature birth and so does the baby in turn instigating the subsequent death of her mother. Her death is the crucial trigger that sets the events of the resolution going towards the conclusion after the story attains its climax. By using her body to attain favors and eventually buying her family the tickets they needed to go to Canada, she paid the ultimate price too of honor and commitment to family. However what moral lies in such honor and commitment is a question we leave out there.

3.3.4. Lune, the Hopeful Fiancée

The only person who makes it out of Kenya is Lune. As we have seen, she is Boniface Kuseremane's fiancée. They met and fell in love in Kigali, Rwanda, at her parents' funeral (p. 14). Lune then stops her ballet studies in France in order to live with her fiancé. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist feels very close to Lune. She is his temptation and his obsession. He likes to watch her and to stroke her (p. 15). They call each other many times "Cherie". At this time of their love, hopes still alive in their hearts about their flight out of Africa they are very close. And even soon afterward, it is only Lune out of the three female characters who is able to confide in Kuseremane overtly that she is afraid of their situation in Nairobi (p. 18). We also see how close

they are for she takes his money, which is dwindling and buys herself what she needs, a mirror for example (p. 29) or even to pay rent (p. 21). Later Lune sells her expensive engagement ring to help Kuseremane with the money he needs as he chases after their plans in Nairobi (p. 26). However, this act marks the emotional divorce between the two as their relationship takes a hit too beside their financial status.

She buys the mirror after the sale of the engagement ring and recalls her life at the ballet school in France and the sacrifice she made for Kuseremane (p. 29). After Kuseremane, confused and in rage, kicks the mirror down, she stares at him, smiles and saying, "It was mine." (p. 29). Her fiancé sees the smile and he is afraid. It is a smile of danger, which she also sees in her eyes. It is at this juncture that she and Chi-Chi start to go out to prostitute themselves without the knowledge of Kuseremane or his mother. However, Lune attempts to salve her own conscience by giving hints to his fiancé that they have been selling their body in order to help the family make ends meet. This is clear when she offers to do the same in order to secure a safe and quiet abortion for Chi-Chi in this country where abortion is illegal (p. 29). At the table where she broaches the subject, no answer or discussion on the matter is forthcoming and the only response from Kuseremane is, "I see." She takes this as permission to continue engaging in her acts of betrayal posing to herself that "Now…it has been discussed with family, it is not a question of being forced," (p. 29). In her deluded peace, she leaves the table and strikes a mock ballet pose saying that she will continue to perform as she must on this stage too that life has chosen for her. Like Nurdin Lalani in the other chapter, Kuseremane finds no refuge in his family as the society deals him hard blows one after another. His fiancé has taken to prosititution in a bid to provide for the family and his emasculation or sense of it is obvious. He steadily degenerates and turns inwards like his sister in a form of "inxile". The day Lune arrives with the tickets (p. 30), Kuseremane had reached a point that he cannot touch anymore. However

because he had just lost his mother, and not so long ago his only sister, he lets her touch him.

Lune buries his head on her shoulder. She asks for forgiveness for betraying his love (p. 35). Boniface then informs her that Agnethe has died in her absence and the fiancée faints. The protagonist in a state of panic slaps her awake. Instead of being an understanding individual when she comes too, Lune smirks and takes offence at the slap. Her only thought now is to get away from both Kuseremane and this forlorn city, Nairobi. She has finally achieved the epitome of her character transformation and reaches the firm resolve to depart from Kenya for Canada with or without her fiancé. She departs. Insanity creeps in on the part of Kuseremane and his life ceases to have its meaning, or as Partington (2006, p. 110) puts it, his character becomes "cancelled" as the story comes to an end. In her exile in Canada, Lune writes letter after letter to Boniface Kuseremane inquiring when he will join her but she gets no response.

She becomes the villain of the three women. She comes across as an egoistic person who started out with close friends to save their bonds of union and friendship by fleeing a genocide together only to turn into a person who could only save herself. In her exiled action of saving her own self, she in fact loses everything that was important to her – love, family and feminine honor. It is in this light that the story of the Kuseremane's becomes a haunting tale of love and its absence in the context of chaos.

3.4. Imagery as Characteristic of Owuor's Literary Style in "Weight of Whispers" (2003)

Somewhere between the lines of this haunting story, so it seems, sits a painter who uses words as his medium of artistic conjecture. Every detail of the grand and sad story of the Kuseremane family is reflected through these images in the mind of the reader. These images are very striking and no reader can miss them from the powerful and evocative writing style that Owuor deploys in this award-winning story. The purpose of this section is to provide a detailed explanation as to how and why the writing style of this short story writer leads to an intense evocation of her themes as outlined in 'The Weight of Whispers' (2003). We hope to elucidate an appreciation of how imagery as a feature of style, in particular, works as a reflector and intensifier. Through the use of imagery, the author is capable of creating a strong connection between her readers and the text. Moreover, imagery as employed by her in this particular literary work appeals to all the five senses.

To show the use of imagery in the story, let us focus on acoustic aspects of metaphors and some leitmotifs

3.4.1. Acoustic Metaphors as Features of Style

In this first part let us focus on how the writing style or text of 'Weight of Whispers' (2003) catches the attention of the reader through its own manner of appealing to the acoustic channel. Let us do so by concentrating on the stylistic devices which stimulate this channel such as: alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia and synesthesia. We shall also look, later, at speech diversity as well as the contrast between silence and noise.

As the title of the short story implied, 'The Weight of Whispers' (2003) works with a lot of alliterations and assonances which on one side appeal to the reader's

acoustic channel but also create a strong connection between the related words and their meanings. The story is actually permeated with this stylistic device and examples include, inter alia: "Langora…Leopard" (p. 27), "hacking…hedge" (p. 29), "dribs…drabs" (p. 30) et cetera. Some of the alliterations and assonance cases are combined with personification, for example: "tired train" (p. 2003: 30). The reader can therefore, regardless of his or her background, visualize the matter at hand and issues being referred to. Combinations of assonance and onomatopoeia further develop this style of writing, for example, "clock clicks." (p. 19). Onomatopoeia also appears apart with much frequency as is the case with, "cracks knuckles…Crack. Crack." (p. 22). In this case onomatopoeia serves to underscore the policeman's act of superiority and dramatizes as well as emphasizes his deployment of this superiority over the protagonist eventually harming him. It is part of the repertoire of strategies Owuor employs to develop her characters and plot too. All these stylistic devices mentioned above are invoked in order to appeal to the reader's acoustic sensibilities. It is in this way that one can point to the orality of the story and its influences from the orate manner of the society it speaks about, is set in and is intended as the primary or implied reader. The argument advanced by short story scholars in African literature, such as F. Odun Balogun (1991) and MacKenzie (1994), have argued that oral traditions and the orate nature of the everyday in African societies affects the style of written short stories from these societies as well.

3.4.2. Leitmotifs of Silence, Noise and Water

There are several leitmotifs in this short story that also aid in the narrative and text construction or levels. The three named above are prominent. For Kuseremane, silence is necessary in order for him to get the whispers that haunt him and connect him to the genocide back in his home country. Whispers are a sign of the process that later leads

to the mental degeneration, and paradoxically, character development of the protagonist as he descends into guilt. As we have seen above, the protagonist is a suspect in the genocide that has just happened in his country, Rwanda, and is currently fleeing to Europe via Nairobi where he needs his travel papers processed first. The protagonist is linked, through whispers of his fellow countrymen in Nairobi, to the famous assassination of the two presidents of his own country and its neighbor, a historical fact that scholars agree triggered the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 (see Prunier 1995; Mamdani, 2001; Dallaire, 2003 & Melvern, 2000, 2006, Strauss, 2006). These whispers cause the unease in Kuseremane's mind, which in turn develops the plot of the story. As he acknowledges, "Whispers like mist floated over the land of hills and nestled in valleys and refused to dissipate." (Owuor, 2003, p. 11). The whispers cannot be kept away or stopped because they are linked to nature: to the mist that disappears only to return another day. We are told of these whispers being prevalent among crowds of suspicious Rwandese countrymen in Nairobi who, afraid to confront the truth and discuss about it hide their opinions "in the noise" of the busy city. (p. 23). The majority of these individuals seem to avoid the silence.

Water is the other leitmotif of this short story that is omnipresent. As one of the four elements, it has always played an important role in literature across culture and generations. William Shakespeare, for instance, used water imagery to foreshadow death of his characters (Clemen, 1951; Vries, 1976). We find the same intention in Owuor's 'Weight of Whispers' (2003). It is the rain and thunder that are used to present a sense of foreshadowing or what the writer puts as a "strange foreboding" in Kuseremane as the story edges towards its end (p. 29). One of the most interesting attributes of water is that it reflects its surrounding. In this case the author has taken this attribute further. Water does not only reflect the outer and inner world of the characters and their states of mind. It also reflects them each to the other when we see it as part of the mirror that is their eyes as they sit in silence, the Kuseremanes in their

deepening exilic crisis. (pp. 25, 29). There are of course, more overt connections between aspects of water and metaphorical usage as is the case when the element is directly linked to descriptions of humans, for example, "….the crowds dribble" (p. 22) or "the rivers of workers…" (p. 32). The whole country of exile, Kenya, is related to water when the protagonist describes it as, "the watermark of the map of Kenya." (p. 22). Vice versa, water is personified and given human attributes, for example in its "feeling of anger." (p. 29). We believe that in this case, the author's intention is to underscore the fact that humans and nature do not only influence each other but are directly connected each to the other. It is in this way, for instance, that water in the form of rain can be interpreted as a metaphor for sorrow when Kuseremane, after another unsuccessful day chasing travel plans in order to leave Nairobi for Europe with his family, walks home crestfallen as it rains heavily, down the famous River Road (p. 23). We are told that the rain, which ironically should be a metaphor of hope and rejuvenation, "has seeped into his bones and become ice. (p. 19). This irony helps to underscore the upside-down nature of the story and enables us to see this tale of a royal family in exile, accused of crimes that no one can prove they committed relies both on language as well as theme to touch to the big social issues that the author seeks to highlight.

In conclusion then one can argue that the juxtaposition of certain leitmotifs and their prolific deployment in this particular story serves the writer well in terms of her style as well as her thematics. Other stylistic features such as foreshadowing and flashbacks as well as other aspects of the story such as characterization, rely on the effective nature in which imagery is used in 'The Weight of Whispers' (2003) by Yvonne Owuor. Besides, imagery draws the reader's attention to the main themes such as forms of guilt, a pervasive theme throughout the story.

3.5. Conclusion

"Kuseremane, Kuseremane, Kuseremane" – words by which Boniface Kuseremane, a Rwandese aristocrat and refugee in Kenya; the main character and narrator of Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Weight of Whispers* is haunted during his fall from grace in the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide. The short story of the Rwandan aristocrat Boniface Louis R Kuseremane won the Caine Book Prize for African Short story writing in 2003, perhaps for "[…] the subtle and suggestive way it dramatises the plight of the refugee and also successfully incorporates so many large issues." (Owuor, 2004) In this haunting tale, the only fictional account of the Rwandan Genocide written in English to date, Owuor has created a piece of art which is both a deep read as well as a delicate literary work of art. Her 2003 win of the Caine Prize for African Writing is vindicated. In this chapter we have discussed how the situation of refugees in exile is precarious and insecure. This may be the situation for almost every refugee in every exile, although there are of course certain distinctions everywhere and for everyone. The Kuseremane family in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor´s short story "Weight of Whispers" has to endure many strokes and harassment in their exile, eventually everyone, probably except for Lune, collapses. "Exile blurs lines" (Owuor 2003, p. 31). In exile, some things that were taken for granted become exceptional and others that used to be unthinkable become normal. The family, which has been influential and happy in Rwanda, falls apart in Kenya. They experience injustice and betrayal; they are abused and have to struggle for a living. The love of the family cannot be held up nor save them. At the end, Agnethe and Chi-Chi die, Lune leaves for Canada, and Boniface Kuseremane stays back alone in the Kenyan exile. The story shows that the fight for existence is almost unwinnable – if you are stripped bare of existence. It depicts how neither influence nor money, nor education, and even not love can keep one strong if he is not allowed to govern, to live his own life.

Although "Weight of Whispers" is a contemporary story about a Rwandan family in the Kenyan exile, it touches upon fundamental human feelings, such as love, betrayal, and the struggle for living from the perspectives of ethnicity and gender. By describing and analysing the situation of the family in exile, these other, more subtle themes of the story became apparent. An idea of men became evident – although not a very affirmative, but nonetheless a very realistic one – if we dare and open our eyes.

Ultimately, in this character we have also offered an appraisal, apart from discussing various aspects of Kuseremane's behaviour and narrative, of various themes. We have done so by focussing on an important argument. We argued that the way in which the author comprises her characters credibility gives space for the subtle communication of various themes in the short story namely: commentary on unspeakable historical events, meditation on human evil, an account of everyday injustice in the postcolony such as police brutality, the nature of exile, and social discrimination in general. Furthermore, by the portrayal of Kuseremane a parallel is drawn to leaders that abuse their power and lead the lives of the people they subjugate into poverty and calamity.

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined literary works by three major Kenyan writers whose literary careers have made significant contribution to the growth of an Anglophone written tradition in East African letters. These works include: novels and short stories written in the English expression in the course of the late 20th Century and the first decade of the 21st Century. The writers studied in this work were: M. G. Vassanji, Binyavanga Wainaina and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor.

In this study we were interested in examining how ethnicity and gender as two major indices of identity in East Africa today are treated in exemplary works of short and long prose. Specifically, how these two indices of identity, in the hands of the selected writers of note, contribute to the aesthetic and formal thematization, as well as treatment, of identity issues? The uniqueness of this study lies in the fact that it is the first work offering a cross-sectional perspective across ethnic as well as gender divides in contemporary East African prose selected in this research. It thus make a significant contribution to studies on East African literature that have emerged in the past two decades such as: Ahmed (1996), Amoko (2010), Anonby (2007), Azeze (2006), Bardolph (2001), Bran (2008), Breidlid (2003), Gebisa et. al. (2009), Gelaye (2001a, 2001b), Gikandi (2009), Kidane (2002), Kurtz (1998, 2005), Lindfors and Sander (2006), Mahfood (2010), Mbonde (1999), Molvaer (2008), Mwangi (2009), Ndigirigi (2007), Ngaboh-Smart (2004), Nichols (2010), Njogu (1997, 2004), Ntarangwi (2003, 2009), Ogude and Nyairo (2007), Outa (2009), Simatei (2001), Siundu (2010), Wainaina (2009), Wafula (1999), Wamitila (2001, 2002), and Wright (2003, 2004). We live in a complex world where interculturalism, cultural diversity and cultural differences need not just be theoretical concepts informing policy at different levels but also crucial tools with which to map

the boundaries of the literary fields we work in. This awareness guided the present study especially in its conscious decision to include works by the younger Kenyan writers vis a vis that of the more established Ngugi and Vassanji.

The tendency to use or apply sociological parameters in the study of East African literature, Kenyan literature included, is well established as the studies above attest. Owing to the multiracial and multicultural nature of the societies of the nation-states that make up the region, this is an almost natural phenomenon. These countries include Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Burundi. The first three countries, from whence comes the majority of our sample are homes to indigenous African communities and immigrant communities from South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula as well as visible communities of European descent. It these three strands of cultural heritage that make the composite core of East African identity as a region.

Naturally, a study of diverse writers and genres such as this one relies on an eclectic but carefully selected set of theoretical practices/frameworks and methodological orientations. The study drew from narratology, postcolonialism, gender and cultural studies in a research-based attempt to provide across seven chapters a scholarly panorama of contemporary Anglophone East African literature, its formal as well as thematic idiosyncrasies. Kenyan prose provided the case study for analysis. The chapters of the study are bracketed by the introduction and conclusion respectively. There are four chapters of analysis that form the body of this dissertation.

In general, the study confirms that ethnicity does not shape the selection of forms in East African literature but it does influence the thematic aspects of the works of the writers. Gender operates in the same manner. The most important observation from this study, however, is that creative imagination is one of the pathways by which a people or culture presents itself to the world. It represents their internal and external

environments. To study the sociology of literature is to contribute in the creation of awareness around a society and its vocal agents.

4.1. Specific Conclusion from Analytical Chapters

Specifically, the study has shown that:

iv. East African prose writers across divides of ethnicity and gender all employ narrative techniques and design that appropriately bring out the themes of their works and articulate their social vision. In doing so, they are not unique or different from their compatriots elsewhere on the continent and indeed across the world.

v. All major narrative modes appear to be popular across East African literature with some writers settling for particular modes in order to handle the complex nature of their themes. An example in this case is Binyavanga Wainaina. However, the degree of competence in handing certain formal matters with special reference to the selected works only does vary from writer to writer.

vi. Ethnic identities exemplified by the authors do not influence their formal consideration. Gender identity appears to influence more the female writers especially in the context of writing autobiography. However, both identities do influence the selection and treatment of themes in all the writers.

4.2. Further Recommendations

This study has opened two main areas for further research. These areas include:

1. Stylistics and Sociolinguistic approaches to the younger generation of writers including: Vassanji, Wainaina and Owuor, as well as their peers, need to be conducted in order for an extensive appreciation of form in their literary works to emerge.
2. An extensive work of literary historiography needs to be researched and written in order to taxonomify and archive the contributions of exemplary writers of all genders and ethnic/racial divides. Such work should operate from the framework that literature is literature no matter the colour or sex of the writer who writes. Sociological dimensions should be made secondary to literary excellence in such a study.

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DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ethnische Identitäten und „Gender"- Thematiken in der ostafrikanischen Literatur der Gegenwart

Diese Dissertation untersucht Werken von Gegenwartsschriftstellern aus Ostafrika, die entweder dort oder im Ausland leben. Der Textkorpus umfasst neue Romane und Kurzgeschichten in englischer Sprache aus Kenia als ein Mikrokosmos der Region Ostafrikas. Die Region Ostafrika bringt sowohl schriftliche wie auch orale Literaturen hervor. Ostafrika produziert neben englischprachigen Literaturen auch Literaturen in der regionalen Sprache und *lingua franca* Kisuaheli. Der Begriff „Gegenwartsliteraturen" bezieht sich allgemein auf die Literaturen in englischer Sprache, die letzte Zwanzig Jahren (1991-2011) entstanden sind. Die in dieser Studie untersuchten Autoren sind: M. G. Vassanji (Kenia/Tanzania), Binyavanga Wainaina (Kenia/Uganda), und Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor (Kenia).

Die Studie unternimmt eine kritische Infragestellung von neueren Werken von etablierten Schriftstellern wie Vassanji und Ngugi und von neu entstandenen Werken von jüngeren Schriftstellern, die zur Jahrhundertwende (21. Jahrhundert) neue Blicke auf Fragen der Identität entwerfen. Vordergründig wird untersucht, die Art und Weise wie "Ethnizität" und "Gender" in Romanen und Kurzprosa als Indexes der kulturellen Identität fungieren. Wie tragen diese zwei Faktoren zur ästhetischen bzw. formalen Thematisierung der Identitätsfragen in Werken von etablierten bzw. aufkommenden Schriftstellern? Diese Studie entsteht aus der dringenden Bedürfnis, angesichts der vermehrten Konflikte der jüngsten Zeiten, neue kritischen Studien zur den entstehenden Konturen der literarischen Diskursen und vor allem der Diversität der literarischen Kulturen in Afrika hervorzubringen. Die schöpferische Imagination ist eine der Mittel, womit eine Gemeinschaft oder eine Kultur sich in der Welt

präsentiert. Sie stellt die internen bzw. externen Umwelten dar. Daher trägt das Studium der Soziologie der Literatur zur Selbstverständnis der literarischen Handlungsträger einer jedweden Gesellschaft bei. Letztes ist nicht nur die tragende Annahme der Studie, sondern die Hautpthese der „postcolonial studies“ als eigenständige literaturwissenschaftliche Disziplin.

Die Tendenz, soziologische Parameter in der ostafrikanischen Literaturwissenschaft anzuwenden ist bereits fest etabliert. Aufgrund des multikulturellen Charakters der Gesellschaften und Nationen aus der die Region besteht, dürfte diese Tendenz kaum überraschend sein. Unter diesen Ländern befinden sich Kenia, Uganda, Tansania, Somalia, der Sudan, Äethiopen, Ruanda and Burundi. Die ersten drei dieser Länder, woher die meisten unserer literarischen Texten entstammen, beherbergen indigene afrikanischen Gesellschaftsgruppen sowie Einwanderungsgruppen aus Südasien und der arabischen Halbinsel, wie auch sichtbare Sozialgruppen europäischer Herkunft. Diese drei Stränge der kulturelle Erbe bilden zusammen das Kompositum der ostafrikanischen kulturellen Identität als Ganzes.

Es versteht sich von selbst, dass eine solche Studie, die eine Vielzahl an Schriftstellern und Textsorten unter die Lupe nimmt, auf breitgefächerten, jedoch sorgfältig ausgewählten theoretischen bzw. methodologischen Grundlagen basieren muss. Daher werden in dieser Dissertation theoretischen Paradigmen aus der “Gender Studies”, der postkolonialismus Theorie und eigenen Aspekte von Narratologie angewandt, in eine Untersuchung, die im Laufe der sieben Einzelkapiteln, eine wissenschaftlich fundierten Panorama der englischsprachigen ostafrikanischen Literatur in seiner ganzen Breite und mit seinen formalen bzw. thematischen Besonderheiten, bietet.

Curriculum Vitae

For reasons of data protection, the Curriculum Vitae is not published in the online version (of this thesis).