

SINGING AGAINST ANTI-ASIAN SENTIMENT IN THE EAST AFRICAN POSTCOLONY: JAGJIT SING'S "PORTRAIT OF AN ASIAN AS AN EAST AFRICAN"

Danson Sylvester Kahyana

Makerere University, Kampala (Uganda) & Stellenbosch University (South Africa)

ABSTRACT

The 1972 expulsion of Asians from Uganda by the President of the time, General Idi Amin Dada, is one of the most traumatic events that Uganda has suffered. This article examines how this event is imagined in Jagjit Singh's 'Portrait of an Asian as an East African' (1971). I am interested in three inter-related issues that the poet depicts in this work: the pain of being uprooted from a place one has known as home, only to be cast into a state of statelessness and refugeehood; the nature and character of the emergent postcolony that the poem speaks to; and the ability of poetry to give prescient insights, given the fact the poem was published a year before the expulsion was announced. In the close reading of the poem that I perform in this paper, I pay special attention to the poetic devices that the poet deploys to speak to the three issues that I have mentioned above, and the success with which he does this.

KEYWORDS: Prejudice, Expulsion, Trauma, Atrocity, Asians.

UN CANTO CONTRA EL SENTIMIENTO ANTI-ASIÁTICO EN LA POSTCOLONIA DEL ÁFRICA ORIENTAL. "PORTRAIT OF AN ASIAN AS AN EAST AFRICAN" DE JAGJIT SINGH

RESUMEN

La expulsión de la población asiática de Uganda perpetrada por el presidente del momento, el General Idi Amin Dada, es uno de los episodios más traumáticos que Uganda ha sufrido. Este artículo examina cómo el poema de Jagjit Singh, "Portrait of an Asian as an East African" (1971) imagina este episodio. Mi interés radica en analizar tres aspectos interrelacionados del poema: el dolor del desarraigo y la condición apátrida del refugiado; la naturaleza y carácter de la poscolonia emergente a la cual el poema se dirige; y la capacidad de la poesía para formular premoniciones sobre el futuro, dado que el poema en cuestión se publicó un año después de la proclama de la expulsión. En la interpretación del poema que realizo, destaco los mecanismos poéticos que el autor utiliza para tratar los tres temas antes mencionados y el éxito con que los lleva a cabo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: prejuicio, expulsión, trauma, atrocidad, asiáticos.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2021.82.07>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 82; April 2021, pp. 95-107; ISSN: e-2530-8335



INTRODUCTION

In *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English Since 1945* (2007), Simon Gikandi and Evan Mwangi (76) identify Jagjit Singh as one of “the most important East African writers,” but they do not provide a special entry on him and his work. A talented poet and playwright, his work imagines the tension between the Asians and the black politicians of newly independent East Africa in a powerful and poignant way. Born in Uganda in 1949, Singh “went to Senior Secondary School, Kololo, where he was awarded a Gold Medal for obtaining four distinctions in A-levels in 1969” (Cook and Rubadiri 199) and to the School of African and Asian Studies at the University of Sussex where he “won distinction while reading literature” (Gregory 447). His works include his play, *Sweet Scum of Freedom*, which “won third prize among six hundred entries in 1971 in the Second BBC African Service Competition for new half-hour radio plays” (Gregory 447), and “Death, etc., etc.,” “No Roots, No Leaves, No Buds,” “Portrait of an Asian as an East African,” and “Public Butchery” in *Poems from East Africa*, an influential anthology edited by David Cook and David Rubadiri, first published in London by Heinemann Educational Books in 1971.

“Portrait of an Asian as an East African” is in three parts. In Part I, the persona sets the scene of the issue he is discussing, the impending expulsion of the Asians from East Africa over the “great issue of citizenship” (156). The Asians are being treated shabbily by the post-independence politicians who doubt their (Asians’) commitment to the newly independent nations, and who have forgotten the Asian contribution to East African modernity, evidenced by their historic role in building the Kenya-Uganda railway between 1896 and 1903, which left over two thousand four hundred of them dead “while six and a half thousand were invalided” as a result of “the hardships that the thirty-two thousand indentured laborers had to endure –plagues of jigger-infestations, man-eating lions, harsh weather conditions and workplace accidents” (Ojwang 10).

In Part II, the persona remembers the bravery of the Indians for treating the Victoria Cross medal given to them by imperial Britain with contempt, for it is a false honour in the sense that it was “for blood discarded / and bodies dismembered / in white wars of yesterday” (157). It is implied that the Indian soldiers did not have a cause for which they were fighting, which is why the persona sees their acts of soldiership in terms of discarding blood and dismembering bodies. It is this realization that they were made to fight a war that had no meaning to them that makes them treat the medals given to them with so much disdain that they fling them “into the dung-heap of the british empire” (157). This line can mean at least two inter-related things: that the British Empire is no more than a dung-heap (so it deserves no respect), and that the British empire has collapsed (i.e. it is a dung-heap). Perhaps this explains why the noun “Britain” is spelled with a lower-case b, instead of the upper-case B that is usually used to render the names of countries or empires.

In the final part, the persona bemoans the toxic racial situation in East Africa, where the colour of the Asians’ skin has made them “malignant cells [that] must fade away soon” and “green leaves / that must sprout no more” (158), that is to say,



a group of people fated to a certain doom, which I read as the impending expulsion and loss of their homes, with the term ‘home’ having a ray of meanings including “a sense of “patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (Marangoly George cited in Ojwang 5). This final part, like the first one, makes it clear that the Asians are victims of history, hence the lines “lead the ram to the altar / and wash away the sins of history” (159). This allusion to the Jewish religious practice of a ram being killed as atonement for the sins committed by the community underlines the persona’s view of the impending expulsion of the Asians as a scapegoat. In this paper, I revisit this view, and several others that the poem throws up for reflection, as I examine the manner in which Singh imagines the 1972 expulsion of the Asians, which his poem –like Peter Nazareth’s novel *In a Brown Mantle*– prophesied. Suffice it to mention that prophesy in this context means the ability to “see the present with absolute clarity” (Nemerov 223), to the extent of presciently stating what will happen in the near future.

VERSIFYING THE EXPULSION AS LOSS AND TRAUMA

In the poem, the persona depicts the impending expulsion from East Africa as a terrible loss, which is why his tone of voice is one of anguish. The Asians are not just on the verge of being expelled from the region, but they are also humiliated in different ways, hence the powerful image of the “bent shadow” that the black nationalists will soon break, which could refer to the loss of pride and confidence that the Asians have suffered to the extent that they are not willing to fight back when they are provoked. The phrase “bent shadow” suggests that they are under a lot of strain (they are imagined from the perspective of a shadow, moreover one that is not straight), while “unfriendly frown” gives the reader an idea of the atmosphere that the Asians are living in (that of loathing). No wonder, in back alleys and government offices, they wear a “subordinate Asian smile of friendship / that proclaims the Jew also is a citizen” (157), thereby attracting the hostile reply, “citizen? ... perhaps so, / but of Asian extraction” (ibid). The allusion to the Jews is important, for it is meant to give an idea of how serious the Africans’ resentment was to the extent that it is compared to anti-Semitic attitudes in Europe, made most famous in William Shakespeare’s play, *The Merchant of Venice* (which features a Jewish businessman, Shylock) and most notorious in Nazi Germany where millions of Jews were killed during the Second World War. I read the exaggeration contained in the allusion to be intended to attract attention to the plight of the Asians in post-independence Africa, which is undoubtedly dire, but not comparable to that which the Jews endured at the hands of Adolf Hitler. The poem imagines a future where the Asians will soon be

flying,
unwelcome vultures all over the world,
only to unsheathe fresh wrath
each time we land (158)



In Simatei's reading of these lines, "[t]he gesture really is to another place, another nation where the ritual of dispersal will probably be repeated" ("Writers in Diaspora"), since if the country of the persona's return were India, his land of descent, then the question of wrath upon arrival would not arise. The India the persona knows is not a physical one that he wishes to return to, but rather what Salman Rushdie calls an imaginary homeland – "an India of the mind" (10).

Suffice it to mention that the above lines ("and soon we shall be flying, / unwelcome vultures all over the world, only to unsheathe fresh wrath each time we land") proved perceptive, if not prophetic, for indeed when the Asians were expelled from Uganda, they were not well-received in the country most of them headed for – Britain – irrespective of whether or not they held British passports. The word "wrath" is particularly important given the fact that Britain did not just decide "to disown its responsibility to its non-white citizens" as David D'Costa, one of the characters in Nazareth's second novel *The General Is Up* puts it (44), but actually did worse: it claimed that the Asians, even those who held its passports, were Uganda's responsibility (Kahyana "Negotiating" 126). Derek Humphrey and Michael Ward give a detailed account of this in their book *Passports and Politics* (1974), where it is clear that Britain's reluctance to welcome its coloured passport holders is a kind of expulsion which, like Amin's, was based on racial grounds. White families from other commonwealth countries enter Britain without any difficulty while Asians from East Africa are barred from the country because of the 1968 Immigration Act which made their D-class British passports worthless. Salman Rushdie comments on this issue thus:

One of the more curious aspects of British immigration law is that many Rhodesians, South Africans and other white non-Britons have automatic right of entry and residence here, by virtue of having one British-born grandparent; whereas many British citizens are denied these rights, because they happen to be black. (133)

Rushdie is being diplomatic here, for what he is actually saying – if stated in crude terms – is that the distinction that Britain makes between passport-holding and citizenship when it comes to denying black or coloured people into the country is racist. In his memoir about the expulsion *From Citizen to Refugee*, Mahmood Mamdani gives many examples of British racism against the expelled Uganda(n) Asians. For instance, in a refugee camp in Kensington, the Asians are called 'wogs' and treated like helpless refugees, even those who carry British passports. Things get from bad to worse in this camp; eventually, camp dwellers are asked to carry cards and wear badges clearly marking them as refugees. When four white people come to the camp and try to beat three Asians, the camp personnel just stand and watch. A huge fight erupts as the Asians try to defend themselves, leaving one of them wounded (*From Citizen* 127). If we remember that it was Britain with its allies like Israel that did not just bring Idi Amin to power, but also kept him there for "eight long years" by selling him high-tech military and surveillance equipment (Mamdani *Imperialism* 1), this segregated treatment of Amin's victims becomes hard to bear. It is evidence of what the persona calls "the false kindness of the white race" (Singh "Portrait" 158), for both the British passport and Britain itself that the Asians



associated with security against ultra-nationalist post-independence politicians turn out fake and unreliable, respectively.

INTERROGATING SOME OF THE POEM'S ASSUMPTIONS

There is no question about the fact that the expulsion of the Asians from Uganda casts them as victims of history and as scapegoats. In the first place, the Indians did not engineer the colonial creation of “a racially stratified society, with the whites constituting the upper class, the Asians the middle class and the Africans the bottom class, hewing wood, fetching water and baby-sitting white and brown babies” –a three-tiered racial structure in which “the British used the Asians to serve the imperial interests by acting as the intermediary between the white colonizers and the black Africans” (Kahyana “Narrating” 101) and to “to provide a buffer between the Europeans and the Africans” which made them “absorb most of the resentment against the new cash economy, although they were never its sole or even primary beneficiaries” (Ojwang 13). It is the British colonialists who engineered this three-tiered system, which inevitably made the Africans consider the Asians as part of the colonial force that was lording it over, and subjecting them to servitude. In this respect, the Asians are victims of history, including that which imagined them as “Jews of Africa,” an epithet which contained the same negative assumptions about the Asians as were to be found concerning Jewish merchants in Europe (Seidenberg 14).

But the Asians were not completely victims of history or “the unintentionally corrupted” (159) as the persona puts it, for there is at least one instance in which they contributed to their troubles in post-independence East African countries. This is in the area of their relationship with Black people, in which they considered themselves superior to the Africans whom they regarded members of the lowest caste, and atavistic remnants of the Neolithic Age (Seidenberg 7). Tirop Peter Simatei suggests that this feeling of racial superiority on the part of Asians, together with the notion of exclusion, which is so ingrained in their caste-centered social organisation that it comes to them almost naturally, militated against social (and sexual) intercourse between them and the Africans (74). Most Ugandan Asian writers are honest about the existence of racial prejudice among some Asians as shown by what they depict in their writing. Jameela Siddiqi, for instance, sarcastically depicts the ignorance of some Asian characters, whose crass prejudice against Africans is appalling. One such character is Mrs Naranbhai in her second novel *Bombay Gardens*, who on arrival in East Africa muses thus:

[W]hat a pity about the natives. Why did they have to be so dark [...] How could one know whether they were clean or not? With such dark skin how do you tell dirt apart from skin colour? Did they wash? How did they know when all the dirt had washed off? Did the water turn black? So why were the rivers and lakes so clear and sparkly blue? Is it true they eat humans? (101-102)

While the novel makes it clear that this crass prejudice is a result of the fact that this is Mrs Naranbhai's first visit to Africa, her attitude towards Africans does



not change in the course of the novel; if anything, it gets worse as her relationship with her servant, Jannasani, whom he accuses of being the typical lazy African even as he works himself to the bone, shows (Kahyana “Negotiating” 136).

In her memoir *No Place like Home*, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown Alibhai-Yasmin depicts similar racist sentiments. Her uncle, Ramzan, says: “These black shenzis [barbarians/savages] don’t know how to make money, you know. It grows on trees here” (7). And his son, Shamsu, shares this sentiment: “It is in their nature, you know. Bloody empty-headed, can’t work, just want to drink their money, only understand the stick and the shoe [a reference to the practice of some Asians beating Africans]. No culture, you know, not like us” (9).

There are many ways in which one can explain this prejudice, but three will suffice for this discussion. First, the colonial racial structure already discussed above, which placed the Asians as second to the British, and therefore racially superior to the Africans. Second, the Asians’ caste system which places people in different social positions of privilege or servitude. In this scheme of things, Africans were regarded members of the lowest social caste (Seidenberg 7). Finally, the Asians’ anxiety about their future, that is to say, their fear of a black peril of sorts should the tables of the racial structure turn, thereby dismantling their racial and economic privileges. This is because independence “precipitates a crisis in the master-servant relationship precisely because it is achieved on principles such as equality and freedom of the African hitherto treated as if fit only to be a servant of both the White Man and the Asian” (Simatei 93-94). In other words, for the Asians, what was unimaginable happens, thereby throwing their world into disarray.

Needless to mention, these toxic sentiments of racial superiority soured the relationship between Asians and Africa, thereby contributing to the tense environment that Idi Amin exploited in 1972 when he expelled the Asians from Uganda. As for the view that the Asians served as “the scapegoats for the real exploiters who want[ed] to find an excuse for the lack of egalitarian development in the country” (Nazareth “Social Responsibility” 97), this is mostly true, given the fact that even the most corrupt black government officials like Gombe-Kukwa (as depicted in Nazareth’s *In a Brown Mantle*) and Dr. Ebongo (as depicted in Singh’s radio play “Short Scum of Freedom”) shamelessly make this charge. Besides, “[f]ewer than 10 percent of the Asians were involved in business, industry, and transportation: most were teachers, doctors, civil servants, bank clerks, and lawyers” (Nazareth “Adventures” 383), while the “pre-1972 owners of large-scale property: industrial, commercial and residential” numerically “constitute a tiny minority [of] around 50 families” (Mamdani “Ugandan Asian Expulsion” 272). This means that the charge of exploitation usually labelled against Asians as a group is erroneous, for it gives the impression that all Asians were traders and industrialists. This does not mean, however, that all the Asians were completely clean. There were those who were involved in unethical business practices that tantamounted to exploitation, if not economic sabotage, for instance those that M.A. Tribe writes about in his article “Economic Aspects of the Expulsion,” who siphoned money out of Uganda using methods like “over-invoicing of imports and under-invoicing of exports, false declaration of factor incomes such as profits and rents, and improper use of personal transfers” (144).



On the issue of Asians taking on East African citizenship, the poem makes it clear that for the post-independence black nationalist, it is not enough that the Asian is a citizen: he/she remains in the category of the alien irrespective of his/her citizenship status, simply because he/she has a different skin colour. This signals the failure of citizenship as a pedagogical tool meant to construct the people belonging to the nation as “the many as one” and “out of many one” (Bhabha “DissemiNation” 294), irrespective of the differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, or sexuality. This is the reason as to why when the Asian declares himself/herself as a citizen, the black nationalist replies sardonically, “perhaps so, but of Asian extraction” (Singh 157). In other words, the reality of difference in race overrides the unity that the pedagogical tool of citizenship is designed to inscribe or foster, thereby making the exclusion of the Asians from the category of citizen, and later their expulsion from Uganda, “symptomatic of the sickness of the nation, indeed of the failed project of building a multiracial nation” (Simatei 99). Mahmood Mamdani attributes this partly to the shrewdness of some Asian capitalists/bourgeoisie who, by the middle of the 1960s, “had succeeded in shifting the terms of affirmative action from ‘Africanisation’ to ‘Ugandanisation’ so that [b]y virtue of citizenship, and local incorporation of companies, it was now in a position even to benefit from affirmative action” (95). This angered the black nationalists for they were able to see the game the capitalists were up to, as I explain in a moment.

Affirmative action, it should be recalled, came into being in the early 1950s, as the British colonial government’s response to the nationalist peasant strikes of 1945 and 1949, which called an end to racial discrimination that favoured the whites and the Asians at the expense of the Africans in various areas like industrialisation, large-scale farming, retail business, and the civil service (Mamdani “Uganda Expulsion” 94). It is the shrewd shifting of the terms of affirmative action from Africanisation to Ugandanisation that made the category ‘citizen’ suspect, since it collapsed the distinction between citizen and subject –to use Mamdani’s famous formulation– that had sustained the colonial enterprise, with the citizen being the civilized (the non-native, usually white, with rights) and the subject being the native, considered uncivilized and in need of “an all-round tutelage” (Mamdani *Citizen and Subject* 17). The insightfulness of this formulation is however haunted by its failure to adequately explain the place of the Asians in British colonial East Africa, for although they were non-native and with some rights, their privileges were not as wide-ranging as those of the white colonialists. They were citizens but not quite, to paraphrase Bhabha’s famous phrase, “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha *Location* 89) –a thing that remains true even after political independence as the poem under discussion so powerfully demonstrates.

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of the poem is the way it imagines pre-colonial East Africa using the imperialist language of civilizing the dark savage. The persona attributes the hostility that black nationalists mete on the Asians as arising from amnesia: black blood has decided to “forget / swamp sleeping savagery of greenness / that burst into an Indian bazaar” (156). I understand the persona to be saying that East African civilization and modernity owe themselves to the Asians’ presence in the sense that before their arrival, the region was “swamp



sleeping savagery of greenness” (ibid). Since the black nationalists “have no quibbles whatsoever about the pleasures of modernity” (Ojwang 164), as seen by the Mercedes Benzes they drive, the black suits they wear and the bank accounts they run in Switzerland (“Portrait” 156), it is implied that their shabby treatment of Asians is a form of ingratitude that needs to be exposed and condemned. By imagining pre-colonial and pre-Indian diaspora East Africa as being mere swamp and jungle, Singh elides black Africans’ achievements of the period, for instance pre-colonial Buganda’s impressive highways that John Speke, Emin Pasha, and Henry Morton Stanley write about with respect (Reid 105-07), and her production of iron implements like hoes and knives which ceased with Britain’s colonisation of the country as a result of mass importation of British iron products (Mamdani *Politics and Class* 34-35).

Besides, there is a problem with attributing the bad blood between the Asians and the Africans to a failure in memory, since it “suggests that the problem is fundamentally one of consciousness and attitudes” as Ojwang observes, yet a better approach is to locate “the conflict in the uneven patterns of accumulation and exploitative social relations, rather than one that focuses solely on the affective responses to such historical problems” (Ojwang 164). This contextualization is what this paper attempts. Singh’s take on the friction between Asians and Africans in post-independence East Africa therefore comes off as partisan, since he identifies with the British colonialists, who conquered the region and other parts of the world in the name of civilizing the native. While his poem might be read as a lament for lack of equitable treatment of Asians and Africans in post-independence East Africa, the fact that he constructs the Asians as having civilized and modernized savage Africa that is now throwing out the bringer of modernity might be read as a desire, if not a call, for a privileged position for the Asian.

It is significant that the poem takes the entire region of East Africa as constituted by 1970 as its area of focus, and not just Uganda where the expulsion was to take place in 1972. This is evident in its title, “Portrait of an Asian as an East African.” There are at least two ways of explaining this, the first one being that the Black people’s resentment to the Asians in the region was widespread in all the countries, as shown by the racially-charged statements many nationalist politicians made soon after independence, and racially-charged happenings. The example of racially-charged statements have been captured in imaginative texts like Nazareth’s novel *In a Brown Mantle* and Singh’s radio play “Sweet Scum of Freedom.” In the former, an African character called Gombe-Kukwaya states thus, with the Asians in his mind, “Those who come to this country must go back where they came from. We can do without your kind here. We have had enough of exploiters” (75). Later in the novel, he ominously declares, “If I were in power, I would chase all these brown people into the sea [because] they kept aloof from us until we won our Independence and now that we are the bosses, they are trying to be friendly” (114). In the latter text, Dr Ebongo, the Minister of the ridiculously large ministry of Commerce and Trade, Broadcasting, Foreign and Cultural Affairs in a post-independence East African government says this as part of his speech in parliament:



[Although now independent] the African is still very, very oppressed, I tell you –economically oppressed. We still have a lot of foreigners in our country. I am referring of course to the Asian community now ... But I must warn the Asians. We will never allow them to have one foot in Britain, the other foot in India and only their hands in Africa playing like prostitutes with our commerce and trade. (45)

These imagined statements reflected those made in actual life, for instance those by the first President of Independent Kenya Jomo Kenyatta and his Vice President Daniel Arap Moi, who bluntly demanded, on several occasions, that Asians leave Kenya if they refuse to subordinate their social, cultural and economic interests to those of black Africans (Theroux 47-48). For the racially-charged happenings, a very good example is the mass expulsion of the Asians from Zanzibar during the Zanzibari Revolution of 1964 (Ojwang 13), which was organized by “a motley crew of peasants, laborers and sharecroppers” led by a Ugandan man called John Okello (Ojwang 96). The tendency to portray the expulsion of the Asians as having been unique to Idi Amin’s Uganda is therefore erroneous. Its purpose, I guess, is to present Amin as the beast, and the leaders of Kenya (Jomo Kenyatta) and Tanzania (Julius Nyerere) as the beauties, which is not historically the case, for while Amin’s ‘solution’ to the human question was cruel and brutal, Kenyatta’s and Nyerere’s were also tough, albeit effected with more subtlety. The end result of these subtle approaches was however the same –the Asians leaving Kenya and Tanzania in large numbers. In M.G. Vassanji’s short story collection entitled *Uhuru Street*, these departures are represented by characters like Aloo (who lives Tanzania in “Leaving”) and the woman in “What Good Times We Had,” who –just before she is murdered– is on the verge of leaving the country.

CONCLUSION

After the expulsion, Singh disappeared from the East African literary scene, unlike Peter Nazareth who remained active as an academic and literary critic based at the University of Iowa in the United States of America, and Bahadur Tejani who kept writing articles, for instance “Farewell Uganda,” published in *Transition* two years after the expulsion, and creative writing collected in *Laughing in the Face of Terrorism* (2009). For Singh, the expulsion from East Africa meant leaving the East African literary scene altogether, so much that it is not known what he wrote and published after 1972, or even what became of him. In this respect, he can be said to be a “proud eagle / shot down / by the arrow / of Uhuru” –to use a verse from Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Prisoner* (94), with the shooter being Idi Amin Dada himself. For if the expulsion had not happened, it is possible that Singh would have continued to write and publish poetry and plays. His silence after the expulsion can be read in many ways, one of them being the hypothesis that I am proposing: that Singh loved Uganda so much that upon being expelled from it, he could not bear write anymore, since writing involves remembering the time gone by, which is itself “a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense



of the trauma of the present” (Bhabha “Remembering” 123). In formulating this hypothesis, I am informed by Charles Kebaya’s insightful observation that there is “a contradictory process at play in representing atrocities: the compulsion to speak and make the trauma visible and the pressure to remain silent in the face of one’s inability to articulate a truthful representation of the experience” (2). This insight guided me to the conclusion that it is likely that after prophesying the atrocity that was about to happen to Ugandan Asians, Singh became too traumatized to continue writing about the country he had lost, hence his silence after 1972.

I am invoking p’Bitek’s image with the seriousness it deserves, to underline the toll that the expulsion had on some of its victims. The image suggests that the eagle is grounded, wounded or perhaps killed by the arrow with which it is shot. Likewise, Ugandan Asians who were expelled do experience a deep wound in terms of the statelessness they experienced, with Bahadur Tejani remaining as stateless as 1976 (Tejani and Koshi 48), and the trauma that the expulsion caused on their psyche, particularly on the idea of self and belonging. But there is a difference between p’Bitek’s persona and Singh’s: the former is shot down (read: detained) for assassinating a post-independence political leader (presumably a head of state), that is to say, there is cause for his arrest and detention, while the latter is shot down (read: expelled) for the colour of his skin and “the sins of history” associated with this colour, some of which have been identified already –prejudice against Africans, racial isolationism, and ethnic insularism, to mention but a few. While p’Bitek’s persona could have avoided his fate if he had not assassinated the politician, it is likely that Singh’s fate is more or less sealed, for even when the Asians work hard to be accepted as East Africans (by participating in the anti-colonial struggles in Kenya, contributing to the East African economies through industrialization initiatives, and taking on Ugandan, Kenyan and Tanzanian citizenship), the stereotype that they are exploiters (milkers of the economy as Amin put it) remains. This makes “Portrait of an Asian as an East African” an archive of atrocity, in the sense that it documents how the Ugandan nation cleansed itself of one of the groups that constituted it –the Asian citizens or residents– thereby causing this group untold anguish and trauma. It is also “a memorial to a people and a place” –to use Rashna Batliwala Singh’s phrase (138)– in the sense that it keeps alive the experiences and anxieties and the feelings of despair and dejection that the East African Asians experienced at a particular time and place in history.

The helplessness and despair that the persona experiences in the poem is recognizable to anybody who has lived under a dictatorship, where the ordinary citizen is treated like an inconvenience or a burden to be got rid of, and not a resource to be harnessed for national survival and development. For while the poem depicts the invalidation of Asian citizenship in the East African nations of the 1960s and 1970s as having been as a result of the racial intolerance and prejudice of the time, this practice (of invalidating citizenship) still takes place in the East African nations of the 21st century, but in a different form. In Uganda, this is seen in the way some groups, for instance members of the political opposition, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-sexual, queer and inter-sex people, are hounded by state apparatuses like the national Police force, which acts in partisan ways during elections (Abrahamsen and



Bareebe 3), and the national parliament which enact homophobic laws targeting them (Xie 6 and Jjuuko and Mutesi 269-270), respectively, irrespective of their citizenship status. In President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni's Uganda (in power since 1986 and still counting), sometimes the invalidation takes the form of people being denied particular opportunities because they do not have access to the huge patronage machine that has been put in place, which is "typically in the form of government contracts, tenders, and jobs" (Mwenda 29). Needless to mention, this machine does not care whether or not one is a citizen; what matters is one's relationship to the people in power by blood, marriage, or "the political leanings of the clients" (Green 95). In other words, Singh's poem continues to be relevant today, 50 years after it was published.

Reviews sent to author: 10/12/2020

Revised paper accepted for publication: 28/01/2021



WORKS CITED

- ABRAHAMSEN, Rita and Gerald BAREEBE. "Uganda's 2016 Elections: Not Even Faking It Anymore." *African Affairs* 115/ 461 (2016): 1-15. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adw056>.
- ALIBHAI-BROWN, Yasmin. *No Place like Home*. Virago, 1995.
- BHABHA, Homi K. "Remembering Fanon: 'What Does the Black Man Want?'" *New Formations* 1 (1987): 118-124.
- BHABHA, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." In *Nation and Narration*. Homi K. Bhabha (Ed.). Routledge, 1990. 291-322.
- BHABHA, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- COOK, David and David RUBADIRI (Eds.). *Poems from East Africa*. East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1971.
- GIKANDI, Simon and Evan MWANGI. *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English Since 1945*. Columbia University Press, 2007.
- GREEN, Elliott. "Patronage, District Creation, and Reform in Uganda" *Studies in Comparative International Development* 45/1 (2010): 83-103. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-009-9058-8>.
- GREGORY, Robert G. "Literary Development in East Africa: the Asian Contribution, 1955-1975." *Research in African Literatures* 12/4 (1981): 440-459.
- HUMPHREY, Derek and Michael Ward. *Passports and Politics*. Penguin Books, 1974.
- JJUUKO, Adrian and Fridah Mutesi. "The Multifaceted Struggle against the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda." *Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights: (Neo)colonialism, Neoliberalism, Resistance and Hope*. Nancy Nicol et al. (Eds.). University of London, 2018.
- KAHYANA, Danson Sylvester. "Narrating National Identity: Fiction, Citizenship and the Asian Experience in East Africa." In *Africa Development*. 1/2 (2003): 97-111. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ad.v28i1.22170>.
- KAHYANA, Danson Sylvester. "Negotiating (Trans)national Identities in Ugandan Literature." Unpublished PhD Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2014.
- KEBAYA, Charles. "Conceptualizing Representations of Atrocity in Art. In *Cultural Archives of Atrocity: Essays on the Protest Tradition in Kenyan Literature, Culture, and Society*. Charles Kebaya, Colomba Kaburi Muriungi and J.K.S. Makokha (Eds.). Routledge, 2019. 1-8.
- MAMDANI, Mahmood. *From Citizen to Refugee: Uganda Asians Come to Britain*. Frances Pinter Publishers, 1973.
- MAMDANI, Mahmood. *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda*. Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.
- MAMDANI, Mahmood. "The Uganda Asian Expulsion Twenty Years After." *Economic and Political Weekly* 28. 3/4 (1993): 93-96.
- MAMDANI, Mahmood. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton University Press, 1996.
- MAMDANI, Mahmood. 1976. *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda*. Fountain Publishers, 1999.
- MWENDA, Andrew M. "Personalizing Power in Uganda." *Journal of Democracy* 18/3 (2007): 23-37. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0048>.
- NAZARETH, Peter. *In a Brown Mantle*. Kenya Literature Bureau, 1972.



- NAZARETH, Peter. "The Social Responsibility of the East African Writer." *Callaloo* 8/10 (1980): 87-105.
- NAZARETH, Peter. "Adventures in International Writing." *World Literature Today* 61/3 (1987): 382-387.
- NAZARETH, Peter. *The General is Up*. TSAR, 1991.
- NEMEROV, Howard. "Poetry, Prophecy, Prediction." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 47/ 2 (1971): 209-226.
- OJWANG, Dan. *Reading Migration and Culture: The World of East African Indian Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- P'BITEK, Okot. "Song of Prisoner." *Two Songs*. East African Publishing House, 1971.
- REID, Richard. *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda: Economy, Society, and Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*. Fountain Publishers, 2003.
- RUSHDIE, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. Granta Books, 1991.
- SEIDENBERG, Dana April. *Uhuru and the Kenya Indians: The Role of a Minority Community in Kenya 1939-1963*. Vikas Publishing House, 1983.
- SIDDIQI, Jameela. *The Feast of Nine Virgins*. Bogle-L'Ouverture, 2001.
- SIDDIQI, Jameela. *Bombay Gardens*. Lulu.com, 2006.
- SIMATEI, Tirop Peter. *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa*. Bayreuth University, 2001.
- SIMATEI, Tirop Peter. "For Writers in Diaspora, Home is always a Space in the Mind." Daily Nation. 31 January 2014. <https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/weekend/for-writers-in-diaspora-home-is-always-a-space-in-the-mind-944486> (accessed 31 October 2020).
- SINGH, Jagjit. "Sweet Scum of Freedom." *African Theatre: Eight Prize-Winning Plays for Radio*. Gwyneth Henderson (Ed.). Heinemann Educational Books, 1971. 35-51.
- SINGH, Jagjit. "Portrait of an Asian as an East African." In *Poems from East Africa*. David Cook and David Rubadiri (Eds.). East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1971. 156-59.
- SINGH, Rashna Batliwala. "Uganda Asians." *Transition* 126 (2018): 132-144. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2979/transition.126.1.18>.
- TEJANI, Bahadur and Anne K. Koshi. "An Interview with Bahadur Tejani." *Journal Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 21/3 (1993). 43-54. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8tk4t1cv> (Accessed 5 November 2020).
- THEROUX, Paul. "Hating the Asians." *Transition*, 33/7 (1967): 46-51.
- TRIBE, M.A. "Economic Aspects of the Expulsion of Asians from Uganda." *Expulsion of a Minority: Essays on Ugandan Asians*. Michael Twaddle (Ed.). The Athlone Press, 1975. 140-176.
- VASSANJI, M.G. *Uhuru Street*. Heinemann, 1991.
- XIE, Nancy. "Legislating Hatred: Anti-Gay Sentiment in Uganda." *Harvard International Review* 32/1 (2010): 6.



