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Precarious Journeys: Crossing The Colour Line(s) in M. G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* and Ronnie Govender's *Black Chin White Chin*

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This article examines M. G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) and Ronnie Govender's *Black Chin White Chin* (2006) through the cultural implications of miscegenation and argues how, as a literary trope, this represents a creative response to the question of the Indian ethnic presence in Africa. Related to this presence is the concept of Afrocentricity which defines how a gravitation—or a lack of such—towards a sense of Africanness defines East and South African Asian cultural identity. I will also incorporate rhizomatic theory as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) so as to frame the new identity models that miscegenation can give rise to. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall,* I explore the triangulated relationship between the white, Black and Indian communities, and flesh out the shifting ambiguities brought about by the ontological in-betweenness of the Indian community in East Africa. Regarding *Black Chin White Chin*, I examine how the text brings to light the specific context of apartheid and how this created a singular set of realities for the Indian community within South Africa. To substantiate my claims, I have incorporated brief references to the historical backstories that inform both novels. I also provide other literary references that help frame the debate. Sarah Ahmed's (2007) conception of how the non-white body is coerced into orientating itself towards an image of whiteness is of particular value in my article; however, I argue that the set of theoretical considerations put into place by Ahmed need to be contextualised and reconsidered when examining the intimate relationships between the Indian and the Black/Coloured bodies depicted in the novels discussed.

Keywords: miscegenation; in-betweeness; Indian identities in East and South Africa; Afrocentricity.

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Viajes precarios: cruzando la(s) frontera(s) racial(es) en *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* de M. G. Vassanji y *Black Chin, White Chin* de Ronnie Govender

Este trabajo analiza las novelas *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall,* de M. G Vassanji, y *Black Chin White Chin* de Ronnie Govender en relación con las implicaciones culturales del mestizaje y argumenta que este tropo literario es una respuesta creativa a la presencia de la población india en África Oriental y en Sudáfrica. Esta presencia se relaciona con concepto de Afrocentrismo que define cómo una gravitación—o su ausencia—hacia un sentido de africanidad marca la identidad cultural del sujeto indio procedente del Este y del Sur de África. El análisis incorpora la teoría rizomática según la definición de Gilles Deleuze y Félix Guattari (1987) para enmarcar los nuevos modelos de identidad que el mestizaje puede generar. El análisis de *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* indaga en la relación triangulada entre las poblaciones blancas, indias y negras, y explora las ambigüedades creadas por la condición ontológica de estar "entre" que la comunidad india ocupa en África Oriental. En cuanto a *Black Chin White Chin*, se analiza la cuestión del *apartheid* y cómo éste creó una realidad distinta para la comunidad india en Sudáfrica. Para substanciar la lectura crítica de ambas novelas, se incorporan unas breves referencias históricas relevantes al análisis. En cuanto al enfoque teórico, el análisis se basa en el trabajo de Sarah Ahmed (2007), su percepción sobre la configuración del cuerpo no-blanco y como éste se ve coaccionado a orientarse hacia una imagen de la blanquitud. Finalmente, se argumenta hasta qué punto seria pertinente revisar las consideraciones teóricas de Ahmed al examinar las relaciones entre el sujeto indio y los cuerpos negros/mestizos representados en las novelas.

Palabras clave: mestizaje; entre-lugar; identidades indias en el Este y Sur de África; Afrocentrismo.

1. Introduction: Asian In-Betweenness in East and South Africa

Ambiguity is the driving force behind all of M.G. Vassanji's literary production (Desai 2001, 198), and one can locate the seeds of this ambiguity within the triangulated relationship that existed between the African, white settler and Indian communities in East Africa. Within the East African region, the colonial administrations in Kenya, Uganda, Zanzibar and Tanganyika all set up a three-tier racial system where the Indian population functioned as a buffer between Africans and Europeans. The British East African Company, in particular, actively fomented the idea of Asians as an alien wedge.[1] As a non-national trading class, Indians became isolated from local Africans and paid the price of being politically disengaged through their reliance on the colonial

[1] I use the terms Asian and Indian interchangeably. Following East African historiography, both have been widely employed to describe communities of South Asian origin whose identities were shaped more by regional

state for support (Mamdani 1983, 10). East African Indians developed an identity as middle men within the colonial economy. Dan Ojwang identifies how "endogenous South Asian categories came to be transformed into colonial contact zones" (2013, 15), and M.G. Vassanji's *The Gunnny Sack* (1989), for example, explores these contact zones through the character of Dhanji Govindji, a Gujarati trader, who, on arriving in Tanzania in the late nineteenth century, takes an enslaved African woman, Bibi Taratibu, as his concubine and he fathers his first child, Huseni, with her. Children of mixed heritage in East Africa receive the label of *chotara*, a pejorative term in Swahili that originally signified the offspring of Africans with Indians but whose contemporary meaning has been neutralised to mean any form of racial mix. Bahadur Tejani's *Day After Tomorrow* (1971), on the contrary, examines miscegenation between Indians and Africans as a conscious gesture to Africanise Indian identity. My use of *miscegenation* is not aligned with its historically charged or racialized origins. Through Dan Ojwang (2013), I reclaim it as a critical metaphor for cultural and social crossings in postcolonial contexts. The term illuminates how intimacy across racial lines destabilizes colonial hierarchies and exposes the politics of belonging. I employ *miscegenation* analytically, not descriptively, to trace how postcolonial writers subvert colonial vocabulary. Its inclusion foregrounds the embodied, gendered dimensions of hybridity, engaging the term critically to reveal, rather than reproduce, the violence embedded in its history. In Tejani's novel, the protagonist Samsher's crossing of the colour line is considered utopian inasmuch as the "reconciliation it forges between the cultural particularities of Asian East Africans, on the one hand, and the imperatives of Africanization politics, on the other, [...] [becomes] a blueprint for national belonging" (Ocita 2017, 4).

Despite these literary testimonies to the entanglements between the Indian and African communities, one can detect a pervading sense of pessimism permeating much East African Indian writing. This pessimism is principally rooted in the precarious position of the Indian community within East Africa; a precariousness that came into sharp focus during the national independence movements of the 1960s and 70s within the region when, in the face of the growing animosity of Africans towards the Indian population, many opted for exile. Peter Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle* (1972) perhaps best expresses this existential pessimism through its focal character, Deo D'Souza, who, despite his affiliation with the African nationalist movement and his attempts at reconfiguring his Asian identity through sexual contact with African women, fails at hybridising his identity. The novel closes with D'Souza departing from East Africa, his last words being: "Goodbye, Mother Africa [...] Your bastard son loved you" (1972, 150), which expresses the incommensurability of the borderline existence of Indians in Africa as perceived by the novel's protagonist.

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positioning than by strict national labels. This follows established scholarly practice; for example, cultural critic Dan Odhiambo Ojwang (2013) consistently uses both terms when discussing East African Asian experiences.

While one can draw certain similarities between East Africans and South Asians with regard to their origins as transoceanic traders or indentured labourers, it is important to draw specific attention to the differences between these communities. In South Africa, there were four official racial categories; namely African, White, Indian and Coloured.[2] As regards race relations, South African Indians were historically compromised by the policy of segregation encapsulated in the Group Areas Act.[3] This made them more politically active as a collective in comparison to East African Indians where only a "tiny minority" of Indian political leaders actively stood up against the colonial system (Ojwang 2005, 10).[4] South African Asians, in contrast, actively participated in political activities of a cross-ethnic nature which served as a bulwark against apartheid.

In this light, it is useful to comment on the identity affiliations of the two authors examined here as they tend to inform the points of view put forth by the respective narrators within the novels analysed in this article. Ronnie Govender, on the one hand, professes a solid connection with South Africa, which is expressed in his poem "I am of Africa":

> Though I feel the weight of generations
> I know who I am
> I am an African. (quoted in Chetty 2017, 2)

M.G. Vassanji, on the other, has always expressed a personal anxiety as regards his status with his native Tanzania and, in 1970, he went into permanent exile and became a Canadian citizen (Desai 2001, 192).

2. Belonging Yet Not Belonging

Vassanji's voluntary exile thus reflects not only a geographical displacement but also a condition of psychic estrangement, a position that complicates the notion of home, belonging, and identity within postcolonial subjectivities. This sense of "in-betweenness" becomes the epistemic space from which postcolonial writers interrogate the limits of racial and cultural belonging. The same ambivalence is palpable in narratives where intimate relationships become the testing ground for colonial and

[2] In this article, I use the term *Coloured* in its specific South African historical and socio-political context. Under apartheid, *Coloured* referred to a legally defined racial category encompassing people of mixed ancestry, positioned between "White" and "African" within the colonial hierarchy. Although deeply rooted in segregationist discourse, the term continues to carry cultural and communal significance, denoting a distinct identity shaped by complex histories of racialization, displacement, and cultural hybridity in South Africa.

[3] This act signified a centralised control over the ideology of racial segregation. Areas became divided into racially segregated zones where only members of one specific ethnic group could live and work. These group areas were created for the exclusive occupation of a designated group, and it was a criminal offence for a member of one racial group to reside on or own land in an area set aside by proclamation for another ethnic group.

[4] Tina Steiner, however, bears witness to the political work of Sophia Mustafa in the Tanganyika African National Union as an example of the Indian involvement in the national liberation movement within East Africa (2011, 132).

racial hierarchies. Pujolràs-Noguer's (2018) reading of the relationship between Rehana, a *chotara* girl, and Pearce, a white colonist, in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* (2005) explores the politics of desire and the anxiety surrounding miscegenation to reveal how colonial ideology polices not only the borders of nations but also the boundaries of affection, embodiment, and belonging. Seen from the hegemonic perspective of colonialism, Pujolràs-Noguer argues that Blackness and non-whiteness are always deemed as the contaminating element within cross-ethnic relations, and herein lies the pathological anxiety that one often finds associated within miscegenation. This question of contamination is framed within Sarah Ahmed's understanding of the space of whiteness that extends itself into places that "have already taken their shape" (2007, 156-158) to become the absolute norm against which all other subjects must be measured. The focal point of Ahmed's argument is that the image of the white body is configured as a locus of power in juxtaposition to the non-white body which is always trying to negotiate space within which it never feels fully comfortable. The non-white body, Ahmed asserts, is "better described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty, and blockage" (2007, 161). In specific reference to *Desertion*, Pujolràs-Noguer compares Rehana's non-whiteness in relation to the invisible yet normative nature of Pearce's whiteness and, through Ahmed (2007), she argues how the *chotara* girl constructs her sense of self through a racialised notion of whiteness that affords this configuration the power "to orientate bodies around the world in such a way that everything [...] reverses back to the possession or lack of whiteness" (2018, 5).

When exploring the configuration of whiteness in juxtaposition with the non-white body, Ahmed's main focus is on the Black body. While the author does not stipulate her position, I understand Ahmed's use of "Black" as being a term that does not refer to an identitarian positioning, based upon biological "race", but rather a system of knowledge. In this sense, "Black" functions not as a fixed category of identity but as a critical lens through which racialisation and power are made visible. The non-white body in Ahmed's configuration thus shares similar features with the term "Black" in its non-essentialised form. Both these terms describe positionalities shaped by histories of colonialism and subjection rather than intrinsic difference, and they offer a flexible framework for examining how bodies are racialised in relation to whiteness. This is essential for the untangling the perspectives narrated in *The In-between World of Vikram Lall* and *Black Chin White Chin* as regards the Indian relationship to whiteness, where the Indian body is configured as non-white. However, when one turns to other facets of the triangulated relationships within East Africa, or the complex race relations within South Africa, the idea of the non-white body as an umbrella term for difference, I argue, is no longer suitable. This becomes evident in the aforementioned case of the relationship between Dhanji Govindji and Bibi Taratibu in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*. In this novel, one encounters culturally diverse non-white bodies that have moved outside a relationship with whiteness. This may seem self-explanatory, yet what I wish to draw attention to here is how the Indian position within Africa is Janus-like

—that is, double-faced or dual in orientation—which signifies that it can inhabit multiple cultural and ideological spaces at once, and not all these positions necessarily face towards whiteness. Certainly, the East African Indian's relationship to dominant white norms can, in light of Ahmed, be deemed uncomfortable when compared to those white bodies that "flow beyond their physical limits within the space, taking up more space" (2007, 156). However, once the East African Indian body orientates itself towards Blackness a distinct set of considerations are set in place.

The In-Between World of Vikram Lall frames the double orientation of the Asian body through the parallel stories of Vikram Lall and his sister, Deepa. The novel opens with the childhood friendship between Vikram—sometimes referred to as Vic—and Annie Bruce—the daughter of a white settler family—and it is Vikram's secret infatuation with Annie that marks his future affective relations. The narrative is set on the cusp of Kenyan independence, and during this struggle the entire Bruce family are slaughtered by the Mau Mau.[5] This event becomes enmeshed with Vikram's desire to possess a white woman, a fantasy of miscegenation that is dashed by the violence of the anti-colonial struggle. It is through Vikram's story that Vassanji narrates the complexities of Indian identity within East Africa at this moment of profound transition; a transition that spells the exclusion of Indians from meaningful engagement with the new nation. In a revealing internal focalisation, Vikram lays out his precarious situation as follows:

> Here I was, a young Asian graduate in an African country, with neither the prestige of whiteness behind me, nor the influence and numbers of a local tribe to back me, but carrying instead the stigma from a generalized recent memory on an exclusive race of brown 'Shylocks' who had collaborated with the colonizers. (2003, 238)

Through the inner focalisation of Vikram's thoughts, the reader gains an insight into his anxieties as regards what he perceives as the precarious nature of his Indian identity in East Africa. Melissa Tandiwe Myambo argues that the failure of hybridity in the novel is symbolic of what she defines as "Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism's inefficacy, constrained as it is by the British and African cultures which seem weighty and 'genuine' whereas Vic Lall's own in-between Indian-ness is made 'hollow' and shadowy" (2007, 174). This inefficacy is something Vassanji explores at length and from distinct perspectives, yet the overall tone within the novel is to narrate the liminality of Indians in East Africa as being debilitating. This seems at odds with much postcolonial theory which tends to celebrate cultural hybridity. Homi Bhabha, for example, views liminality as dramatizing a culture's instability and sees it being its greatest potential (1994, 184-85).

[5] The Mau Mau were a Kenyan nationalist movement that emerged in the early 1950s to resist British colonial rule and reclaim land and freedom for the Gikuyu and other displaced communities. Centred in Kenya's central highlands, the movement organized guerrilla warfare against colonial forces, leading to the Mau Mau Uprising (1952–1960). Though branded as terrorists by the British, the Mau Mau are now recognized as key figures in Kenya's struggle for independence and anti-colonial resistance.

While Vassanji displays an overall pessimism as regards the precarious situation of East African Indians, there are moments in the novel where one finds a measured optimism. This is most evident in the story of Juma Molabux, who takes Sakina-dadi, a Maasai woman, as his wife. This marriage represents one of the novel's few gestures toward reconciliation across the racial and cultural boundaries imposed by colonial East Africa. Molabux, an Indian shopkeeper navigating his own marginality as an in-between figure in the colonial hierarchy, embodies hybridity and adaptation. His union with Sakina-dadi, who adopts aspects of Indian culture—dress, language, and domestic customs—illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of cross-cultural integration. Their relationship challenges colonial taboos against racial mixing, yet it also reveals how assimilation and belonging are often negotiated unequally within such encounters. Within the racial hierarchy of colonial Africa, it is the Maasai woman who reconfigures her ethnicity through assuming the dress of a northern Indian woman and speaking fluent Punjabi, and her skill at acquiring this new identity is such that Vikram is oblivious to her Maasai identity. Sakina-dadi's appropriation of Indianness, in this light, can be viewed from two perspectives. The first is to see it as a strategy to orient her Blackness around Molabux's in-betweenness in order to climb the racial hierarchy established by colonial rule. One, however, can also argue that Black African identity is non-essential, performative in nature, and thus open to transformation.

How East African Indians attempted, and often failed, to negotiate a cultural space that accommodated both their Indian and their African identities is one of Vassanji's main concerns. This is particularly evident in the second half of the novel which narrates Kenya's transition from a colonial to a postcolonial world. With the end of colonial rule the aforementioned three-tiered society where Asians served as a buffer between the autochthonous Black community and the white settler population disappeared. This power shift within post-independence Kenya can be configured through what Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks deems "[t]he rationale of racial difference and its organization can be understood as a Hobbesian one" in the sense that, in any given situation, there is always a struggle to "perpetuate singular claims to power and dominance" (2003, 7). Regarding the new Black elite in postcolonial Kenya, while they were tolerant of East African Indians, the text suggests that this group was under pressure to reconfigure its identity within the new power paradigm. Despite the pervading stigma of being an Indian Shylock, Vikram resists re-orientating towards a more Afrocentric perspective. This is narrated through Vikram's relationship with Paul Nderi, a member of the new African elite with whom he has become close. Nderi wants to draw Vikram out of what he defines as "the Asian quagmire" (2003, 267) by encouraging a sexual relationship between Vikram and a Black Kenyan woman.[6] This exchange between Nderi and Vikram is where the tension between political idealism and personal hesitation is

[6] In his novel *Amriika* (1999), Vassanji explores this theme through the distinct focus of forced marriages between Asian Zanzibari girls and Africans as a despotic measure to "help along the integration of the races" (287).

fleshed out within the novel. Nderi envisions miscegenation as a symbolic and practical means of forging national unity; an Afrocentric redefinition of belonging that dissolves colonial racial hierarchies. His suggestion that Indians cross the colour line embodies a call for integration into the new postcolonial nation. Vikram's refusal, however, reveals his attachment to in-betweenness; by resisting this invitation he exposes the lingering divisions between African and Indian identities and the difficulty of transforming hybridity from political rhetoric into lived reality.

Nderi's attempts at drawing Vikram into a scenario of miscegenation draws attention to a reconfiguring of the negative perspective of the *chotara* and its cultural significance within East Africa. The shift from the stigmatised value of the *chotara* to a more positive one within a postcolonial context speaks of a social distancing from the rigid colonial racial configurations. This, I argue, is a strategy on behalf of the new ruling elite for Indians to form stronger ties with the new nation state and, thus, weaken their diasporic identity. Nderi, in this respect, envisions miscegenation as a transformative tool in the redefinition of the diasporic identity of Indians in East Africa. By encouraging the mixing of Indian and African communities, he seeks to foment an organic hybridity rooted in an Afrocentric perspective where Africanness forms a core aspect of Indian belonging. By Africanness, I refer not to a fixed ethnic or cultural identity but to a relational sense of belonging grounded in shared historical experience, locality, and cultural interconnection. Africanness denotes an identification with Africa as a lived space and epistemic framework, rather than an inherited or racial category. This allows Indian identity to be reimagined through its entanglement with African social and cultural realities, yet the text questions whether such hybridity is truly achievable or remains an idealised political aspiration. On a personal level, Vikram rejects Nderi's attempts at creating these new identitary affiliations through miscegenation, and this provokes Nderi's irritation. In a clear allusion to the in-betweeness of Asians in East Africa, Nderi tells Vikram: "You people have your feet planted in both countries, and when one place gets too hot for you, you flee to another" (292). The context for this discussion can be found in a previous conversation where Vikram assures Nderi, "I [...] preferred my place in the middle [...] it is my natural place" (285). Behind his rationalising of in-betweenness as his preferred existentialist state lies Vikram's childhood fascination with Annie Bruce. Having never consummated his desire to possess the white body, I suggest, becomes the emotional motor that drives Vikram's alienation within a post-independence Kenya. By insistently clinging on to a redundant orientation towards whiteness, he closes off all other avenues of reconfiguring his identity.

Colonial administrations worldwide afforded minority groups strategic privileges over the wider population as a means of control. Amy Chua (2004) speaks of how free market democracy displays a tendency to replicate this colonial practice: the superior financial positions of the Lebanese community in West Africa, the Jewish community in post-Soviet Russia, and the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines are all examples of minority groups who, due to their status as privileged outsiders, are

all looked upon with suspicion by the autochthonous populations (Chua 2004, 35-38).[7] Vassanji depicts how Indians in post-independence East Africa were often used as trusted fixers through which the kleptocratic state operated. I suggest that the community's resistance to mix with the local Black population due to the cultural stigma encoded within miscegenation played a part in the persistence of their in-betweenness. This stigma informed the racial separation of Asians in East Africa and, as a trope, it is prevalent in much of Vassanji's work (Ponnuthuria 1985). Furthermore, the predominant cult of domesticity within the Indian community played a primary role in this racial separation whereby:

> domestic spaces (as racial, ethnic, national or family enclaves) are conceived as inviolable private domains, to be defended from the strange world outside, which in turn has to be domesticated in order to be rid of its disturbing otherness. (Ojwang 2013, 87)[8]

This continued racial separateness of Indians within a post-independence context thus makes Vikram a perfect candidate to be a fixer. He allows himself to become involved in the syphoning off of public money, telling himself: "The game of money requires the presence of someone such as me, the neutral facilitator" (2003, 318). One of the perks of being a facilitator for the kleptocratic regime is to receive bribes in the form of sexual favours. In Vikram's case, this marks the beginning of a dysfunctional relationship with a white Italian woman, Sophia, whom the regime has put in his path. While Vikram rationalises the situation telling himself that: "No doubt Sophia was a hooker, though of an expensive and exclusive (I flatter myself) variety" (289), she becomes the conduit through which he re-enacts his childhood infatuation with Annie. This childhood fantasy to whiten his identity is thus projected onto a postcolonial context, and his orientation towards whiteness informs his isolation within a post-independence Kenya.

3. Afrocentricity and its Complications

I define the term Afrocentricity through my reading of how East African Asian cultural identity is framed through its relationship with Africanness. This relationship is present in the novels of Bahadur Tejani and Peter Nazareth, both of which deal with

[7] Chua argues that *these* populations often view economically dominant minorities with suspicion because these groups embody both privilege and distance. As transnational citizens, their perceived allegiance lies not with the nation-state but with global networks of capital and influence. This outsider status, combined with visible prosperity, creates resentment among local populations who associate their economic hardship with the minorities' success. Thus, these communities come to symbolize inequality and exploitation, reproducing colonial-era hierarchies where power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of a few non-native elites.

[8] Ojwang appropriates this concept of the "cult of domesticity" through his reading of Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995). McClintock argues that, in imperial ideology, the iconography of gender becomes its central trope, and in the Asian African diaspora the figure of the woman shores up the sense of *khandaanity*, or family-ness, of the patriarchy. Female transgression of *khandaanity* thus becomes the biggest threat to this separate identity as regards its link to the domestic realm (34-35).

the Asian diasporan's drive to assimilate the national cultures of East Africa on the cusp of independence (Ojwang 2013, 21). In contrast, as Ojwang also states, Vassanji's opus expresses "an unease with the nation-building projects of East Africa" (22) and it examines the complexities of an Indian community that occupies a liminal space within the post-independence state. Afrocentricity, or a resistance to this, thus becomes a tool for identifying, in Vassanji, the distinct models of East African Indian identity and, in Govender, South African Indian identity. This concept underpins my analysis of the works of these two writers.

We have seen how Vikram Lall resists a more intimate connection with Black Kenyan culture and prefers to remain a cultural outsider. His sister, Deepa, on the contrary, makes a conscious decision to reconfigure her identity through her romantic involvement with Njoroge, a Gikuyu man.[9] Whilst Deepa is prepared to face down the social stigma of a sexual liaison with a Black African male, it is Njoroge who resists transgressing ethnic exclusivism. This resistance is informed by his anxiety of having to deal with what he perceives as the stigma of fathering a future *chotara* child, and it is through Njoroge's sublimated ideology of racial purity that Vassanji provides a further narrative layer regarding miscegenation. This ambiguity comes to the fore with the advent of post-independence, and it is flagged up in the text in a scene where the Kenyan politician, Tom Mboya, declares at a public meeting that cross-ethnic relationships are "a good thing for racial harmony" (2003, 212). Previously, the reader saw how high-level politicians such as Vikram's friend Paul Nderi promoted miscegenation as a means of building stronger social cohesion. In this respect, Stephanie Jones, when speaking of the Indian presence in East Africa, states that "the difficulty of escaping a stultifying and brittle past, [...] is often signified [...] through interracial sexual relationships" (2011, 170). Vassanji, however, problematises this invitation to cross the colour line by drawing attention to the conflict between official discourses and the actual societal realities in a post-independence Kenya, which is less receptive to notions of racial hybridity. Vassanji, who harbours a suspicion of the rationalist drive towards cultural unity in East Africa (Desai 2001, 194), flags up the complexities behind adopting an Afrocentric position rather than a diasporic one through the character Deepa who, on being rejected by Njoroge, agrees to a loveless marriage with Dilip, a member of her own community. Nonetheless, she maintains a covert relationship with Njoroge, and Dilip, on finding out that his wife has not severed her relationship with her previous boyfriend, orchestrates Njoroge's murder. Once Deepa's secret liaison with Njoroge is public knowledge, she becomes a pariah in Nairobi society and is spat on in public. Deepa's demise is mirrored by Vikram's own public vilification when his role as fixer for the kleptocratic elite is revealed.

[9] The Gikuyu—or Kikuyu—are the largest ethnic group in Kenya, belonging to the Bantu-speaking peoples of East Africa. Traditionally agriculturalists from Kenya's central highlands, they played a central role in the country's anti-colonial struggle, particularly during the Mau Mau Uprising, and remain influential in Kenya's political and cultural life.

The only refuge from the complexities of interracial relationships that the novel offers is in the form of spaces that exist outside normative surveillance. The first is represented by the trope of youthful innocence, which emanates from the aforementioned childhood relationship that the book's opening page references between Vikram, Deepa, Annie, and Njoroge. This intimate space is not, however, governed in the same manner under the complexities of the adult world and, as such, functions as a heterotopia. The second space corresponds to hermitical existence outside society. This is narrated through the episode of Janice, an old white colonial woman, and the Gikuyu Mungai, who live a secret life together in the Abedares mountains, north of Nairobi. Janice, a British settler widow, and Mungai, a former servant on her family's farm, have developed a quiet companionship that evolves into intimacy. When most whites left Kenya after independence, they retreated together to the Aberdares where they live in secrecy.[10] Their bond, sustained by mutual loyalty, survives outside both colonial and postcolonial society. Once the high-level case of corruption against Vikram is made public, he absconds to the Abedares to be with Janice and Mungai before travelling to Canada, and it is within the isolation of this heterotopia that Vikram feels safest.

The draw Kenya holds upon Vikram's imagination, however, is stronger than his desire for a diasporic existence in Canada, and when he returns to Kenya after a short sojourn in North America, he finds that his father, upon being widowed, has taken up with an African woman. "A man gets lonely … Is it wrong son?" (Vassanji 2003, 369) his father tells him, and here Vassanji creates a thematic thread that links to older perspectives on miscegenation through the archetypal lonely indentured Indian trader seeking solace in the Black body. Nonetheless, and despite the many testimonies of Indian males taking African female partners that we find in Ojwang (2013), the book's overall tone regarding the Indian presence in East Africa remains pessimistic. This is focalised through the tragic narratives of Vikram and Deepa, each one attempting and failing to orientate their body towards, respectively, whiteness and Blackness.

4. Divided Self, Unified Selves

Ronnie Govender's *Black Chin White Chin* explores South African Indian identity through a fictionalised account of the author's real-life uncle, Chin Govender. Reminiscent of the nineteenth century *Bildungsroman*, Chin Govender sets out in the 1940s from Cato Manor on a journey through South Africa which, at a deeper level, becomes a pretext to re-evaluate his own identity.[11] Initially, Chin claims that he "never really questioned the separation of the races" (Govender 2006, 132), and it is against this position that

[10] The Aberdares operate as a heterotopic site in the Foucauldian sense, a liminal geography that exists in tension with the dominant social order, where normative hierarchies of race, class, and nation are momentarily suspended. Within this secluded terrain, Janice and Mungai's relationship articulates a form of spatial transgression that gestures toward an alternative social imaginary, one in which intimacy and belonging can be reconfigured beyond epistemic and disciplinary confines.

[11] Cato Manor, located outside central Durban, South Africa, was a multiracial settlement that became a symbol of urban resistance during apartheid. Inhabited mainly by Africans and Indians, it was the site of major

the protagonist initiates the questioning of his community's ingrained conservatism. Through his contact with a multi-racial environment, Chin's world-view shifts towards a sense of belonging that is no longer exclusively informed by his Indian diasporic identity. On his arrival at the South End district of Port Elizabeth, for example, he is astounded to hear, "an elderly Indian woman in a sari [...] speaking fluent Afrikaans" (83), and this new environment excites his imagination. Having been freed from the surveillance of his community in Cato Manor, Chin opens himself up to the new possibilities of social integration that he encounters, and this is performed through the trope of miscegenation whereby he orients his body towards both whiteness and Blackness.

The book's title is an allusion to Franz Fanon's classic text *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), whose main argument is that the colonial depersonalisation project became a discursive mechanism of othering which coerced the Black subject into opposition to all that was white. Fanon explored how coercion created a sense of alienation within the Black body and, through the careful analysis of the narcistic demands made on it, he sought to construct "a progressive infrastructure where Black men can find the path to disalienation" (1986 168). Homi Bhabha, in his foreword to the 1986 text in English, highlights Fanon's enduring relevance for postcolonial thought by focusing on the concept of mimicry, the colonized subject's partial imitation of the colonizer. For Bhabha, Fanon exposes how mimicry destabilizes colonial authority: it produces subjects who appear similar yet remain different, unsettling the colonial desire for control. Bhabha reads Fanon not simply as a theorist of racial trauma but as a thinker of ambivalence, showing how identity and power operate through contradiction. In this light, Fanon's work anticipates later theories of hybridity, cultural negotiation, and resistance within postcolonial discourse. Bhabha indicates that Fanon does not provide a "neat division" between the categories of Black and white, but, rather, constructs a theory of doubling that creates an image "of being in at least two places at once" (xvi). He furthermore argues that this doubling, as Fanon also sometimes suggests, is not located in a "fixed phenomenological point, opposed to the self, that represents a culturally alien consciousness" (xviii). A *fixed phenomenological point*, in this context, implies a stable, fully constituted identity; an unchanging subject-position from which meaning and perception originate. This is precisely the kind of essentialist selfhood that both Fanon and Bhabha challenge through their emphasis on the shifting relational dynamics of colonial identity.

Fanon's exploration of fractured subjectivity and Bhabha's rereading of this fragmentation both dismantle the idea of a coherent, rooted self. For Fanon, colonial identity is produced through disjunction and doubling; for Bhabha, it becomes a site of negotiation and ambivalence. This dynamic resonates with Deleuze and

anti-apartheid protests in the 1940s–50s. The community was forcibly removed under apartheid's segregationist Group Areas Act.

Guattari's rhizome, which similarly rejects fixed origins and privileges multiplicity. All three frameworks conceive identity as non-linear, decentred, and as being in a perpetually process rather than essentially grounded. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's configuration of the rhizome as developed in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) establishes that thought and writing are devoid of a centre or subject from which ideas are organised in an arborescent or tree-like fashion. Epistemology, on the contrary, "makes random, proliferating and decentred connections" (Colebrook, 2002 xxvii) which affords numerous entry points where diverse elements coexist and interact. Deleuze and Guattari anchor their theory on the metaphor of the aforementioned rhizome. They describe it as "a subterranean stem [that] is absolutely different from roots" (1980, 7) and which, "unlike trees or their roots, [...] connects any point to any other point" and is therefore reducible "neither to the One nor the multiple" (45). Rhizomatic theory thus generates outcomes such as multiplicity, a resistance to dualism, and deterritorialisation; the process by which ideas, identities, or social practices are removed from their original context or territory and reinserted into new, shifting frameworks. Considering that the rhizome has multiple entry and exit points that allow for an ethos of interconnectivity, concepts of fixed territories or boundaries become loosened, and a rhizomatic system creates heterogeneity by allowing diverse elements to coexist and interact.[12] The apartheid regime in South Africa that Govender depicts systematically suppresses this rhizomatic hybridity by enforcing strict racial segregation through the Group Areas Act of 1950. These laws spatially and socially divided communities, erasing zones of cultural interaction and ensuring that racial "purity", rather than relational exchange, structured national identity and everyday life.

Against this backdrop of legislated separation and the violent dismantling of shared spaces, *Black Chin White Chin* reimagines geography itself as a narrative device; a map of displacement and persistence through which Govender traces the fractured yet enduring desire for coexistence. The novel unfolds across several key South African locations that mirror its characters' shifting search for belonging. Beginning in the multiracial Cato Manor, the narrative moves through Port Elizabeth—Eastern Cape—and finally to the Cape region—Western Cape—charting a journey shaped by apartheid's displacements and the enduring quest for hybridity and reconciliation. Along Chin's journey, the reader sees how a rift has been created between the Black and Indian communities as a means to stymie other nodes of interaction and thwart a transition from "conflict pluralism to a more open pluralistic society" (Lemon 1991, 8). In the first sections of the novel, Chin Govender comes to understand how the body is central to the subaltern predicament in a white-dominated society. This, I suggest, motivates his initial gravitation towards whiteness. This is seen through his intimate relationship

[12] Through Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work on the rhizome, Édouard Glissant (1997) further develops a concept of "Relation" understood as a principle of unity where diversity operates within a total multiplicity (1997, 206).

with Greta Schmeling, a white South African woman. Her relationship with Chin is significant as it crosses apartheid's rigid racial boundaries, making her both a symbol of transgression and a mirror for Chin's complex negotiation of identity, desire, and mimicry within a racially stratified society. Through Greta, Govender exposes the hypocrisies of apartheid's racial codes and highlights the personal costs and risks of interracial intimacy in a segregated world. From Chin's perspective, his satisfaction as he walks hand-in-hand with her through an exclusively white area in Port Elizabeth speaks to the manifestation of an unconscious desire to gain power through association with whiteness. This relationship, however, is fraught with danger, and the burning of Greta's car which is directly motivated by Chin's crossing of the colour line is an indication of this.

The text evidences how, in a white-dominated society, there was an increasing obsession with racial categories where the Indian body had come under the surveillant and disciplinary gaze of a white hegemony. From a judiciary perspective, the 1957 amendment to the 1950 Immorality Act explicitly forbade extra-marital intercourse between whites and non-whites, and this section of the novel makes a clear allusion to this. Affected by the paranoia and violence that was generated around miscegenation, Chin and Greta make the decision to move to the more racially mixed area of the Western Cape. It is here that Chin appropriates the figure of the dandy as a further strategy to reconfigure his corporal image towards whiteness. Always impeccably dressed in European clothing, comparisons are made between him and Gary Cooper, and Chin attracts a "small appreciative crowd around him" (Govender, 2006 150). As regards Chin's orientation towards whiteness, two perspectives can be established. The first can be focalised through *Black Skin, White Masks* where Fanon rejects the mimicry of whiteness so as to forge an authentic Black culture. The second, regarding Chin's appropriation of the dandy, is configured around an understanding of mimicry which functions like a fetish that "mimes forms of authority" (Bhabha 1994, 86). Mimicry, in this sense, is something "distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind" and is more akin to "a stain which dislocates and revalues normative knowledges of race, writing, history" (Seshandri-Crooks 2000, 378). What Seshandri-Crooks suggests is that mimicry does not reveal an authentic self-concealed beneath imitation; instead, it exposes the instability of racial and cultural identities. As a "stain," mimicry disrupts the coherence of dominant knowledge systems, revealing how colonial representations of race and history are fractured, shifting, and open to revaluation.

Chin's mimicry of whiteness constitutes a strategy that confronts and disrupts the authority of the original—in this case the supposed unquestionable hegemony of white authority—and herein lies the subversive and empowering nature of the protagonist's mimicry. It is useful to set this against what Sarah Ahmed views as the non-white body being "shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world 'white', a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual's arrival" (2007, 153). Ahmed's argument is informed by *Black Skin, White Masks*, particularly by Fanon's

analysis of the Black body's fraught and overdetermined relationship to the category of white. Building on Fanon, she contrasts this hypervisibility of the racialised subject with the invisibility of the privileged white body, which, she notes, "does not command attention" precisely because it is positioned as neutral and thus goes "unnoticed" (2007, 156). Ahmed thus exposes its ubiquitous nature, its capacity to define the normative conditions of visibility itself. Therefore, the white body's privilege lies precisely in its seemingly neutral and colourless form; a form against which all other subjectivities are measured and evaluated. By performing whiteness consciously rather than inhabiting it as neutrality, Chin exposes its constructed privilege and unsettles its invisibility. His mimicry becomes both resistance and revelation: it reveals whiteness as performative rather than natural, transforming imitation into a critique that destabilizes the very authority it seeks to reproduce.

5. The Complexities of Miscegenation

Black Chin White Chin, while examining the normative nature of whiteness within a South African context, also moves outside of the Black-white paradigm of Fanon's text by introducing the trope of miscegenation between the Indian and the Coloured body. This disturbs the binary paradigm within the aforementioned race relations. Regarding this africanising of identity—the gravitation of South African Indians towards a more Afrocentric position—Pallavi Rastogi uses the term "afrindian" (2008, 18) as something that, "disrupts the binary of Black indigene and white settler by introducing a third state of national being: that of postcolonial diasporic" (2008, 9). This orientation towards an Afrocentric position is something that dominates the second part of the novel. During Chin's relationship with Greta, the formation of Chin's afrindian identity begins to emerge, most notably through his close friendship with Michael, a Coloured man—half Xhosa and half Irish—who works under Chin. When Chin tells Michael, "my skin [is] the same colour as yours. Don't ever call me bass" (93), he is expressing that part of his identity that rejects an orientation towards whiteness. This, I argue, is his desire to connect with a multiracial ethos where white is no longer the privileged term. As a political gesture to this newfound orientation, Chin opens up the first multiracial hotel in the Cape region and supports the foundling African National Congress movement, South Africa's oldest and most prominent political party. Furthermore, on terminating his relationship with Greta, he initiates an intimate relationship with Michael's daughter, Grace. Chin's relationship with Grace emerges from a shared sense of marginalization within apartheid's racial order. Their intimacy transcends social boundaries yet remains fraught with the tensions of difference, reflecting both the desire for connection and the persistent barriers imposed by race and class. While Chin's relationship with Grace can be seen as a distancing from his identification with whiteness, the text complicates his affiliation with an afrindian identity through his denial of the seriousness of his relationship with her. He refuses to treat his sexual relationship with Grace as being anything more than casual when

he knows that this is not the case. Here, when the narrator affirms that Chin "had not made any promises to [Grace] [...] yet was it not implicit in the way he made love to her?" (183) the divided nature of his psyche come to light. This can be viewed in light of the Indian community's resistance to miscegenation which I have already discussed through the cult of domesticity in conjunction with *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Both within East and South African Indian communities there remained a stigma attached to crossing the colour line, particularly where Black or Coloured bodies were concerned. Not publicly recognising his son, Devinthiran (Devs), whom he has had with Grace seems to reinforce this reading. While we are told that "[Chin] could do nothing more" (183), that is, he could not legally acknowledge a mixed-race child born out of wedlock, one can still detect the stigma of the *chotara* previously discussed.

The cognitive dissonance regarding the nature of his relationship with Grace motivates Chin's return to Cato Manor. Back under the purveying eye of his community, Chin is cajoled into marrying an Indian woman from his community, and while initially taking refuge within his community may seem like a safe bet, it soon transpires that living within a loveless marriage is suffocating. Chin, for reasons never made explicit in the text, disavows the political potential behind his crossing of the colour line, and while his return to Cato Manor as a respectable and wealthy man may satisfy the *Bildungsroman* narrative arc established at the beginning of the novel, it is rendered superficial when compared to the utopian energy present in the first sections of the book as regards the potential of a multiracial South African society. A debilitating sense of melancholy comes over Chin, and this can be seen as the result of his pragmatic decision of how to cope within an ever-more aggressive apartheid state. In this context, safe-guarding one's limited privilege as an in-between seems to be the only option. This attitude is made evident when Chin, despite his prominent societal position, refuses Monty Naicker's offer to join the Cape branch of the Indian Congress, which sought to bring Indians into the politics of South Africa by creating an alliance with the African National Congress (ANC).[13] The text's central paradox, in this respect, is that while Chin has personally failed at hybridising his identity for the reasons laid out above, his son, Devinthiran transcends this othering and comes to encapsulate the novel's true utopian spirit. Whilst Chin, at first, is sceptical of his son's agency, he finally understands how Devs has created a conduit between the un-activated potentials of *his* own past and the possible futures for a new South Africa, channelled through the hybrid child as harbinger of change. When Devs becomes an active member of the Umkhonto weSizwe wing of the ANC, Chin finally comes to understand the value of his son's efforts at dismantling the ubiquitous apartheid regime.[14] These efforts,

[13] Monty Naicker was a follower of Gandhi and prominent Indian politician within South Africa during the introduction of the Group Areas Act. He advocated for a multi-racial united front against the apartheid regime.

[14] Umkhonto weSizwe—"Spear of the Nation"—was the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), founded in 1961 after the Sharpeville massacre. It waged a guerrilla campaign against apartheid, symbolizing the transition from peaceful protest to armed resistance in South Africa's liberation struggle.

though, land Devinthiran in jail, and it is Chin's visit to Robben Island, that closes the novel. Peering through the grille at the gatehouse, Chin reconnects with his son through the Shivaic chant of the Atman that the narrative describes as, "the song of life, the unbroken melody passed on from parent to child" (275). [15] This unbroken melody refers to the transmigration of the soul, understood as an essence that transcends all phenomena. Chin's reconnection with his son through the verses of Hindu mystic philosophy, however, is also a song to the rhizome in that he creates a confluence between the ancestral and the new through the trope of the miscegenated child. Devinthiran, in this regard, comes to represent the novel's principal ideal of how cultural identities proliferate randomly from many different nodes at once rather than being structured from a single point.

6. Conclusion

Acts of miscegenation are charged with the potential for change and can bring about reconfigurations of identity. Crossing the colour line can also be a precarious journey, and miscegenation as a literary trope has become the favoured means of narrating the disjunctive nature of the Indian presence within East and South Africa. In both novels discussed here, I established how the male Indian's impulse to possess the white female body brought about varied readings. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* this impulse was framed within the dynamics of settler/colonial power; Vikram Lall's persisting orientation towards whiteness is his desire to assimilate white cultural mores, and this played a significant part in his downfall. As a narrative device, it brought into sharp focus how the book's protagonist could not shake off his unconscious drive to vicariously occupy a space of whiteness configured during colonial times. Vikram's failure to renegotiate his in-betweenness drew attention to the precarious nature of the Indian presence within post-independence East Africa. That said, the novel also problematised Indians' efforts to Africanise their identity as a means to distance themselves from this debilitating in-betweenness. We saw this through Deepa Lall's attempt to cross the colour line and indigenise her identity. Her failure to do so, I argued, had its roots in what the text deems as the ambiguous nature of African cultural nationalism. These ambiguities were framed, on the one hand, by Tom Mboya and Paul Nderi's gestures that indicated the Kenyan elite's desire to foment cross-ethnic relationships and to bring Indians closer to an Afrocentric position. The narrative, however, simultaneously signalled a societal resistance to this cross-ethnic ethos through Njoroge's rejection of Deepa on the grounds that he did not wish to father a *chotara* child. Furthermore, the elite's manipulation of Vikram to become a fixer for its kleptocratic activities, and his subsequent scapegoating when the syphoning of public funds comes to light, became a means for the plot to draw attention to the societal position of Indians as

[15] In Hinduism, atman refers to the inner self or soul, the eternal and unchanging essence of a being that is ultimately identical with Brahman, the universal spirit.

outsiders within East Africa. Given the specific historical context in which the novel is set, Vikram and Deepa's stories take on allegorical meaning as regards the position of Indians in East Africa. The pervading narrative pessimism regarding the agency of this community is, I feel, informed by the author's personal decision to take up permanent residency in Canada, where having a diasporic Indian identity is less problematic.

In contrast to Vikram Lall, I argued that Chin's bodily orientation towards whiteness in *Black Chin White Chin* constituted an act of mimicry that was empowering rather than debilitating. I considered the figure of the dandy as destabilising the fixity of white hegemony, and the protagonist's strategic neutralising of ethnic difference, combined with his relationship with Greta Schmeling, as representing a threat to the power of the white settler community.[16] Considering that the action within the novel was situated on the cusp of the Group Areas Act, I established how the oppressive apartheid regime became ever more surveillant of the non-white body, suspicious of its desires, and was given to punishing any perceived transgressions. Govender, within this context, situated an orientation towards whiteness as perilous. On the contrary, an orientation towards the coloured body resulted in a distinct set of considerations. Regarding this particular aspect as represented within *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* and *Black Chin White Chin*, I saw it necessary to provide a close reading of Sara Ahmed's (2007) configuration of the non-white body as regards whiteness. I argued that a separate critique was needed to understand the complexities of the triangulated racial relationships of East and South Africa. In the cultural contexts presented in both novels, one can see how the white body was no longer the single normative location which the non-white body was coerced into gravitating towards. The Indian as in-between in post-independence East Africa or South Africa on the cusp of a power shift dramatised a paradigmatic swerve away from the category of white. This new configuration suggests that racial dynamics in these contexts are no longer exclusively defined in relation to whiteness. Instead, new axes of identity and power emerge between African and Indian subjects revealing that the white body is no longer the sole point of authority in postcolonial race relations.

Regarding *Black Chin White Chin*, I looked at the Indian impulse to Africanise through miscegenation and how this created a disjunct between a spirit of inter-ethnic solidarity, on the one hand, and the ingrained prejudices of the Indian community as regards an orientation towards Blackness, on the other. Whilst the novel's protagonist ultimately gravitated towards the latter, it is through the specific allegory of the *chotara* that Govender channels his vision of identity politics for South African Indians. In the text, the rhizome as an agent for social and cultural change was materialised through the trope of miscegenation, and the hybrid child became a means to re-activate those

[16] Govender, however, does provide certain ambiguities regarding the attitudes of the white settler community. This can be seen in the close friendship between "Stomps" Diederichs, a "conservative Boer from the Platteland" (151), Chin, and the coloured, Rooks Duvenage. Whilst Stomps is ideologically suspicious of miscegenation and is a supporter of the Group Areas Act, he comes to see the relationship between Chin and Greta as "the most natural thing in the world" (Govender, 2006 151).

potentials that apartheid had once truncated. In this respect, the novel performs what Rastogi defines as a "hybridization of the national consciousness" (2008, 18).

The In-Between World of Vikram Lall never moves beyond an aesthetics of ambiguity when dealing with this question of a hybridisation of identity through the trope of miscegenation and, within the text, exile or death were the only suggested solutions available to East African Asians. Ronnie Govender's work, in contrast, tended to exude optimism when narrating the Indian presence in South Africa. That said, post-apartheid narratives tend to focus less on this common ground and more upon the disjunctive nature of race relations in contemporary South Africa. One, therefore, must look at the narrative point of view in *Black Chin White Chin* as belonging to that particular time of euphoria when the spirit of the multi-racial political fight against apartheid was prevalent.

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