

## 'Ye Zindagi Usi ki Hai': Illicit Desire and (Post)colonial Romance in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

GAURAV DESAI

If one were obliged to pick among Vassanji's texts a work that best exemplifies a post-Manichean aesthetics, it would have to be *The Book of Secrets*.<sup>1</sup> In this novel that spans the period just before the First World War and the late eighties, Vassanji challenges some of the ways in which colonialism in East Africa has been imagined. Rather than seeing British colonialism as an unmediated conflict between the white colonizers and the black colonized, Vassanji insists on turning his focus on the presence of Indian communities in East Africa. Instead of reading the white colonizers as a monolithic body of oppressors, Vassanji seeks to differentiate between them and to articulate for his readers what Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler were soon to label the "tensions of empire."<sup>2</sup> Further, by telling stories of illicit and sometimes unfulfilled sexual desires—between colonizers and colonized, between a Shamsi woman and a Hindu man, between a married man and an unmarried woman, between a teacher and a student, between men—Vassanji seeks to unearth the complex negotiations between sexual consent and coercion on the one hand and freedom and regulation on the other. In the process, I argue, Vassanji creates a vision of postcoloniality that is more in keeping with the inevitable resilience of the "maps of Englishness" that Simon Gikandi has so eloquently written about, than the rejectionist models of an earlier, more determined anti-colonialism.<sup>3</sup>

*The Book of Secrets* is structured around the discovery of an old colonial diary penned at the outset of the First World War by Alfred Corbin, then an inexperienced Assistant District Commissioner stationed in Kikono, a fictional town near the border of British Kenya and German Tanganyika. Pius Fernandes, a retired school teacher, embarks on the project of reconstructing the history of this town primarily through the lens of the diary,

but also with additional research on colonial officers' lives such as is available to him through the library research of his U.S.-based former student Sona. He also undertakes "site visits" to the remains of the town that are now in ruins, and fortuitously meets a descendant of one of the main characters of the novel, Jamali the shopkeeper and his African wife Khanoum. Here, memories and oral narratives supplement the account, so that some though not all gaps and silences in Corbin's diary can begin to be filled. As the narrative develops, Fernandes finds that the story of his own life, and the people that have played a significant part in it, becomes interlinked with the history he is attempting to create, thus raising questions not only about the possibility of objectivity but also of the distinctions between writing history and autobiography. The more we trace the predicaments of the characters in Kikono and those in post-fifties Dar, the more entangled appear the historical trajectories. The text has proven to be rich for critics interested in metafiction, postmodern writing and historical fiction and has also provoked insightful critiques on the nature of the frontier and national boundaries.<sup>4</sup> While these are indeed productive approaches to the novel, my own interest here is in the ways in which the novel interpellates race, ethnicity and sexuality. In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, Vassanji has said, "I think sex is the most important thing in the inner life of people. When races come into the picture then sex has to take some new manifestation. The racial interaction has to manifest in some form of sexual metaphor."<sup>5</sup> By dramatizing the centrality but also ambiguity of romance and sexual desire in the colonial and newly postcolonial world, *The Book of Secrets* gives credence to the claim that colonial racial anxieties, as critics such as Antoinette Burton, Godwin Sindi and Dan Ojwang have increasingly pointed out, were at once

\* Gaurav Desai is a Professor of English/Program of African and African Diaspora Studies, Tulane University, New Orleans, U.S.A.

anxieties about sexuality and that the modern regulation of sexual desire is not productively understood without a consideration of race.<sup>6</sup> But furthermore, as Ann Laura Stoler has suggested, while colonial anxieties revolved around transgressive sexual intimacies and precocities, these were not the only domains of concern. "Evidence of affective ties, affective kinship, confusions and transfusions of blood and milk, sentiments of cultural belonging were as dangerous as carnal knowledge."<sup>7</sup> I am as interested in this paper, then, in desires and affections that lie beyond the purely sexual and it is for this reason that I simultaneously turn to the novel's staging of Englishness both in its colonial setting and in the postcolonial pedagogical scene in the classrooms and tutorials offered by Gregory and Fernandes. It is the affective ties afforded by a shared sense of English culture that the novel showcases even as it remains alert to the violence and disruptions caused by colonial rule.

The insertion of the Asian into the narrative of British colonialism in East Africa is arguably the primary motivation behind the novel. Here the simple binarism colonizer/colonized is rendered inadequate since the Asians are neither properly the colonized natives (being British Indian subjects in a foreign territory), nor, despite their allegiance and assistance to the British in their imperial project, properly the colonizers either. There is, rather, a triangular relationship between the British, the Africans and the Asians, a relationship that is fraught with internal tensions and contradictions. On the one hand, the narrative presents the Asians for the most part as colluding with the British, seeking their protection when protection is to be sought, and providing them with services such as finances (as in the case of Jamali's father), or domestic service (as in the case of Thomas and Mariamu). The British, in turn, recognize the relative power and influence of the Asians, so that, as Corbin himself notes, "powerless though the individual Indian is beside a European, as a community they have a voice to be heard" (49). As Assistant District Commissioner, Corbin modulates his administrative actions to countenance the unspoken influence of the Indians of Kikono, orchestrating strategies that will allow both him and them to save face in moments of crisis. In this scenario, the African is the distant other, whose political aspirations and cultural desires do not seem to press upon the conscience of either the European or the Indian community. There is, at the same time, a certain disdain, if not dislike, for the Indians among some elements in the British community. The settler newspapers, we are reminded in the novel, exhibit an "outpouring of vituperation against the 'unhygienic brown man'" (54), and the missionaries, as represented in the novel by Mrs. Bailey and Miss Elliott are convinced that Indians are worse than Africans because they are

"half-savages" (39). As Elliott puts it, "At least the African you can mould. But the Indian and the Mussulman are incorrigible in their worst habits and superstitions. They will always remain so" (39). The one Indian Christian convert that the ladies encounter is Thomas, who is increasingly seen to be a burden by Corbin on account of his excessive Anglophilia and over-protective attitude, and likewise becomes a burden on the Mission station because of the excessive zeal with which he pursues both Miss Elliott and later a young African convert whom he seduces through talk of "something about holy water" (86). To the likes of Bailey and Elliott, the Indian, it seems, is either an incorrigible other, or instead, much too close and intimate for comfort.

The Indians of Kikono have set themselves up, the narrative tells us, as "loyal British subjects—and vociferously so" (28), seeking for Kikono official township status. In response, until it can decide on the feasibility of such a designation for the town, the British colonial government has sent the consolation prize of a young Assistant District Commissioner to the area "when it could spare one" (28). Unlike what one might expect in a colonial frame, the text insists on staging a scenario in which, at least in the local context of Kikono, the English administrative oversight arrives on *invitation* by the Indians. When in the midst of the war, Corbin leaves the town under orders from his superiors, he leaves with the "feeling that he was absconding" (120). This sense of betrayal, of a departure with a task left unfinished, is a key trope that haunts not only Vassanji's texts, but the writing of a number of revisionist authors and thinkers including most prominently the Zanzibari author Abdul razak Gurnah whose novel *Desertion* thematizes this departure centrally.<sup>8</sup> In *The Book of Secrets* it is in response to yet another colonial departure, that of the British from India at the time of Indian independence, that the narrator Pius Fernandes decides to leave India. "The Empire was winding down," reminisces Fernandes, "and those of us who had identified a little more with our colonial masters knew not where we belonged in the new order being fashioned out of the India that was breaking up around us" (238).<sup>9</sup>

To note that the novel foregrounds the Anglophilia of colonial Indians in East Africa is not to suggest that such Anglophilia goes unquestioned. The comic and dismissive manner in which the character of Thomas is treated in the text may at one level be read to be a projection of the relatively more secular bias of the Jesuit narrator Pius, but it also stands for Vassanji's mockery of excessive and oftentimes opportunistic Anglophilia. Pius' friend DeSouza has an expressed distaste for Englishmen and he even confronts Pius about his fascination with the English. The original pecking order by which the

Englishman Gregory is to teach literature and the Goan Fernandes basic grammar doesn't go unnoticed by the narrator and the embarrassment is further heightened when Fernandes, having moved up to a position of teaching literature, finds that his Indian students insist on taking private tuitions on the side with the Englishman Gregory, just to be sure. But, as is the case with Vassanji's earlier novel, *The Gunny Sack*, the enchantment with Englishness is most threatened not in the East African space but in the metropole.<sup>10</sup> Even though Pius remains an Anglophile during his stay in England, he admits that "to see Englishmen in their own habitat, not all teachers, administrators, or governors, not all from Oxford or Cambridge is curiously numbing" (270). And just as Sona in *The Gunny Sack* discovers that London is not as warm and embracing as he thought it might be, life in London for Rita and her husband Ali (alias Aku) is at first quite difficult by virtue of their race.<sup>11</sup> Later, with the assistance of a fellow Jewish immigrant whose business centers around providing financial backing to those children of the Empire that the metropole continues to ignore, Ali and Rita make it financially, so that they can afford mansions in London, a Filipino maid, and a Rolls-Royce formerly used by Nehru, but the text withholds a fully positive judgment. As Rita's own exaggerated attempts to sanitize her marital life in London suggest, the price of wealth has been the loss of her husband who has taken to serial philandering, and for whom Rita is no more than a link with the Indian community from which he is alienated.

Such a simultaneous display of Anglophilia and its potential derailment is contiguous with Vassanji's parsing out of the valences of British colonialism itself. Here the two major counterpoints are those of Corbin and Captain Maynard. The former is characterized as a man who believes in the 'civilizing mission' of Empire, but is also interested and alert to matters of justice and governance on the ground, a man not unwilling, as I suggested earlier, to compromise in the interests of 'progress'. The latter is a man of brutal force, sly tactics and, as needed, forms of espionage that can imperil the lives of those he has at times forcefully enlisted. Maynard's punitive expeditions have been so excessive that they have earned him the censure of the colonial authorities. Yet, Corbin finds him to be a man of contradictions. Maynard's Conradian refrain that "this is a savage country, it makes a savage out of you" (21) does not preclude him (much like Kurtz) from "going native" and wearing a yellow kanzu and tasseled red fez at home or from having an African live-in mistress.<sup>12</sup> He allegedly "respects" the African as a formidable enemy even as he calls him names, and his greatest contempt is reserved not for the African but for "the settler, and the low class of official" (20) in East Africa, who he claims "despises the

black and would use [Maynard] to kill him" (20). When Corbin writes of Maynard that he "disapproves of his actions, not of the man" (22), the text goes quite against the grain of postcolonial judgment insofar as it invites readers to ponder the possibilities of separating, in the words of Yeats, the dancer from the dance.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, it is not simply by introducing Indians into the East African frame as neither properly colonizers nor properly colonized, and presenting them as colonial subjects who accept if not embrace the strictures of British colonialism that the novel attempts to question the ideologies of the Manichean binaries of colonizer/colonized. It also seeks to portray an array of personalities and sensibilities amongst the colonizers themselves. Such a vision of differentiated colonial attitudes and sensitivities may have been rendered in the defensive mode by settler fiction, or even on a liberal register by a writer such as E.M. Forster in *A Passage to India*, but when *The Book of Secrets* was first published in 1994 it was still rare to find it in a work penned by a postcolonial African or Asian writer. *The Book of Secrets* was an important postcolonial intervention in re-imagining the heterogeneity of the colonial experience, from the boorish bravado and ruthless violence of a Captain Maynard, to the coquettish mannerisms of Edwina Unsworth and her niece Ann, to the treachery of the farmer who needlessly flogs his servants, to the "quiet, forceful diligence" and "monastic rigour" of Alfred Corbin (30). "Even Nairobi, white Nairobi," we are told "was not a homogenous society" (63). There are brothel-keepers cum fortune tellers, there are the customers who are "low-level railway officers, salesmen, drifters, out-of-work hunters and scouts" (64), there are aristocrats and high officials and respectable businessmen. While we don't get an intimate look at white colonial society we see enough of it to know better than to read it monolithically.<sup>14</sup>

However, focused on the Indians and the British in East Africa, *The Book of Secrets* is relatively less concerned with the depiction of black Africans. Unlike *The Gunny Sack*, which is primarily about Indian-African relations, and the later novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, which attempts a tri-racial cast, the Africans in the *Book of Secrets*, for the most part, live in their own separate spheres.<sup>15</sup> Even in the town of Kikono, which is settled we are told by both Indians and Swahilis from the coast, the text's investments are primarily with the Indian community. The *wazees* whose words open the book, along with the African residents of the villages surrounding Kikono, remain indecipherable to Corbin, the narrator suggesting that "there were layers of life here clearly inaccessible to him, deliberately hidden from him" (77). Unlike his sense of curiosity about the Indian community in which he finds himself, the text presents Corbin's interest in the

Maasai youth who take him to Lake Chala, or the askaris and their leader Fumfratti who accompany him on his hunting expeditions, as relatively shallow. When Corbin becomes District Commissioner at Moshi and a party is hosted in his honor at the Sports Club, the only guests mentioned are Europeans and Indians.

Even when Africans are central to the narrative frame, as is Khanoum, Jamali's African wife, we learn that the Indian community abandons her after the death of her husband and proceeds later to "rescue" the Indian child Aku from her relatively poor but nurturing household.<sup>16</sup> By voicing her protest to the community in no uncertain terms, "Does this black self lessen in value now that its brown partner is gone? Has my soul lost anything, or my honour?" (197), Vassanji and the narrator Pius register their own displeasure and offer a critique of the Indian community. Nonetheless, Khanoum's abandonment, like *The Gunny Sack's* Taratibu's before her, only helps to further underscore the separation between the communities, and, as in Taratibu's case, her future life is subject to our speculation. Unlike *The Gunny Sack's* racially entangled depiction of Dar in the late forties and fifties, *The Book of Secrets* presents race relations during the same period in mostly monochromatic tones—monochromatic that is, with the exception of the important figure of Robert Gregory and a brief cameo appearance by Julius Nyerere. A reader inclined to believe that Indians in East Africa had little desire to socialize with black Africans (except in order to marry African women), and that they were more enamored by the vestiges of colonialism and its associated power than with black nationalist aspirations, could arguably do no better than to point to *The Book of Secrets* as a literary exemplification.<sup>17</sup>

Vassanji's own justification for such a writing of history may be gleaned from a comment he made in an interview with Shane Rhodes: "If you look at Karen Blixen's books or Elspeth Huxley's books, Indians are hardly present. You see all these films and all the boring books and you wonder: these people who went into Indian shops to buy groceries never saw the Indians around them. On the other hand, the African attracted the white because he was the Other, the antithesis, whereas the Indian really bothered the whites quite a bit; he was in the way."<sup>18</sup> Here, while pointing to the absence of the representation of Indians in settler literature and explaining his own determination to supplement the representational register, Vassanji neglects to acknowledge (unlike Ngugi wa Thiong'o) that settler literature did not do much justice to the full humanity of African subjects either. Be that as it may, Vassanji's intentions are clear—he will re-imagine a colonial scenario in which the colonizers will be forced to see the East African Indian in a way they were not before. That colonial gaze, the quotation with

its emphasis on the "attraction" of the white to the black rather than brown implies, will have to be a gaze that is one not of disturbance (as in "Indians really bothered the whites") but of desire.

The colonial gaze is a central motif in the novel and analogous to the historian's gaze in reconstructing a past society. "What else is a historian but a snoop?" asks the narrator at one point, underlining the pervasive sense of mystery and secrecy that characterizes the text (91). Like Maynard the British military and intelligence officer who must piece together the truth, "the secrets of the enemy," by scavenging through scraps of papers and letters obtained from the German side, Pius too must use what he can to reconstruct the lives and times of people past (154). By the end of the narrative, Pius will be challenged by his former student Rita about his arrogance in presuming "to peep into other lives—to lay them bare and join them like so many dots to form a picture" (297). But such voyeurism, the narrative implies, is not only inevitable in any task of historical reconstruction but may in fact be an integral component of trans-historical and inter-cultural understanding. Indeed, while voyeurism implies an uninvited gaze, it nevertheless results in some sort of insight even if it is inadequate ("How the devil do you do deal with another culture's ghosts?") (72). In contrast, when the gaze is averted, such as is the case with Corbin's hesitant approach to the African villages surrounding Kikono, the possibilities of understanding are derailed.

"We seem to have sighted Mombasa at last" writes Corbin in his diary in March 1913, a sentence that serves as the opening of the first part of the novel where the story of Kikono is told (11). This focus on the ocular pervades the narrative: Corbin has "first laid eyes" (12) upon Africans in Hamburg and begins "eyeing" (11) career opportunities in the colonies; much is made of his role as a "surveyor" (31); he is admonished by Maynard when he is caught "gaping" at his African female companion (19); he is acknowledged by the mukhi as a "keen observer" (50); and perhaps most significantly to the plot, his arrival in Kikono is marked by the sight of a female figure. "So amazed was he by the sight" we are told, "he had stopped to watch" (28). Later, as he becomes conscious of his own responses to the "rather scantily dressed" young women that he encounters in Kikono, Corbin becomes increasingly uncomfortable with his own gaze (29). At the garba dance to which he is invited by the Indian community, he wonders "if it was appropriate to stare and turn[s] away his gaze" (43).

Rather than being detained here by the now familiar arguments on the nature of the male gaze, as well as the nature of the colonial gaze, both of which are signified in the character of Corbin, I want instead to focus on the moment that unsettles not Corbin, but Jamali, the



mukhi of Kikono.<sup>19</sup> "Embarrassed at what looked like exhibitionism for the sake of the white man, the mukhi turned towards Corbin, and the Englishman took his cue" (43). What the mukhi is embarrassed by is not Corbin's alleged stare, but rather his niece Mariamu's exhibitionist stance. And judging by the fact that few critics have engaged with Mariamu's exhibitionism one suspects that such embarrassment is shared by the novel's critics as well. To acknowledge Mariamu's willingness to be looked at is to recognize that Corbin's stare can no longer be read as voyeuristic. Voyeurism is predicated on seeing that which is forbidden—Mariamu instead, invites his gaze. Later, in the narrative, as though to underscore the point, when Corbin runs into her at the edge of the town, Mariamu we are told, at first "turned her covered head away as modesty and custom demanded" (77), but when "in a sudden mischievous move" Corbin turns "catching her unawares" and meets her eyes, Mariamu decidedly refuses to "turn away a second time" (77). Here, even though she has not initiated Corbin's gaze, Mariamu refuses to be reduced by it.

What does it mean for the narrator to turn the voyeuristic and thus pernicious gaze of the colonizer into a look which is dis-empowered and on occasion even welcomed by the colonized subject? It is to emphasize the trope of romance rather than rape in thinking about the colonial encounter. This is a trope that Vassanji has experimented with before in *The Gunny Sack*, but in that case the lines between rape and romance were even more troubled by the fact that unlike Mariamu who is a free person, Taratibu was a slave woman who was handed over from one man to another.<sup>20</sup> Here, in *The Book of Secrets*, it is Mariamu who takes the lead, from the provocative dancing at the garba, to the chapattis left for Corbin on Thursdays, to seating herself near the doorway to Corbin's room "staring intently at him" while he is writing in his diary (79). And yet, to cast her unproblematically in the mode of a seductress would do disservice to the moments in the text where she seems committed to her future with her betrothed, such as the time when she barges into Corbin's house pleading with him to free the imprisoned Pipa. It might be more credible to suggest, then, that much as the school girl Rita is to do later in the novel (with Pius the narrator), Mariamu is instead flirting across what she knows is an "impossible chasm" (245) while at the same time seeking Corbin's help in securing her future with her suitor.

What are we to make of such a depiction of Mariamu? Is it just the re-circulation of the long standing colonial fantasy of a willing, seductive "native" woman on the part of a postcolonial male author? I'd suggest instead that we heed Vassanji's own disclaimer that his own authorial position is quite different from that of his narrator, Pius.<sup>21</sup> As such, the link between Mariamu

and Rita reminds us of the crucial role of Fernandes in framing and narrating the history. It is quite significant that very few of the instances depicting these particular exchanges between Mariamu and Corbin are presented from the first person point of view of the diary. Rather, they are part of the historical reconstruction (third person point of view) that the narrator Fernandes creates. To what extent is the portrayal of a potentially amorous relationship between Mariamu and Corbin a projection of the narrator Fernandes's own sexual desires for Rita? To what extent might his imagining a Mariamu nursing a sick Corbin (to which I will return below) an unconscious projection of his own nursing of his friend Gregory? There is a clue later in the novel that renders this reading plausible. In one of his letters to Gregory, Corbin writes that the idea of his diary "lying hidden in an Indian duka is revolting." (323). Is such revulsion towards the Indian community only the result of a long life in the colonies or is it a bias that Corbin has borne from the very beginning, rendering Fernandes' depiction of his positive relations with Indians in Kikono as mere fantasy? Are we, perhaps, to read the statement "Ultimately the story is the teller's, it's mine" quite literally (92)?

"Mariamu is clearly an allegorical figure in the novel" writes Chelva Kanaganayakam, a sentiment that has oft been subsequently echoed in the critical commentary on the text.<sup>22</sup> But what does she allegorize? In the larger scheme of things, Mariamu is indeed a vehicle for suggesting the possibilities of romance in a necessarily fraught colonial landscape. But in the more immediate context of Kikono, the contestations and doubts around her sexuality may further be seen to allegorize colonial male anxieties. When on their nuptial night Pipa doubts her virginity not knowing whether the trickle of blood that he will have to display is a "banner of his triumph or shame" he is in fact enacting a larger societal anxiety about 'who was there first' (105). Female virginity, as Fatima Mernissi has famously argued, is often construed as a matter between men, where the honor of a man is lodged "between the legs of a woman."<sup>23</sup> Pipa's fear that it is the Englishman Corbin who has "deflowered" Mariamu allegorizes a manifestation of a larger cultural anxiety about the relative priority of Indian versus English presence in East Africa.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, it reduces Africa not only to the conventionally gendered figure of a woman, but interestingly here, of an Indian woman.

Consider here Corbin's own first arrival to Mombasa in which he reads the East African landscape in terms of "the composed exoticism of its orientalism" (12), which allures him much like the figure of Mariamu is to do in Kikono. His early diary entries are fantasies of colonial penetration into an unknown Africa: "Finally I was entering the interior of Africa... the huge and dark

continent that had defied the world for millennia, now opening up to European civilization, to a great Empire of which I was a minor but privileged functionary" (23). Such grandiose sentiments of going where no man had gone before (thus rendering Africans and Indians completely without history), are further echoed by statements in which the agency of others (such as the community networks of the Indians and Swahilis who have primarily been the ones to form towns such as Kikono) is effaced in the light of British intervention: "Throughout the country, towns like Kikono were springing up full of life, the whole land buzzing with a vitality it had not known for millennia, *all due to European intervention*" (33-34, my emphasis). Even when he begins to learn the art of subtle negotiations with the Indians in the interests of peaceful administration (such as having the Government team lose the cricket match against the Indians, or finding a pretext to have a march-past of the police band which is bound to delight the Indian children), Corbin never does lose his confidence in the ultimate primacy and supremacy of the British civilizing mission.

Yet, the narrative is eager to point to the founding of Kikono not as a willful act of English colonial policy but as an accidental romance between an Indian and an African set off by a traveling expedition. Sent by his Zanzibari father to accompany and keep an eye on an Englishman to whom he has extended a loan, Jamali decides to part with the European and settle in the vicinity. In depicting this history Vassanji disrupts the neat narrative of British intervention that Corbin articulates, giving pause to narratives of first arrivals. It is a lesson, I suggest, that Pipa is metaphorically made to learn on his marriage bed and thereafter, when Jamali reasons with him about the societal prejudice about virginity: "The blood they go around showing after the wedding night?—do you think it is always the woman's, ay? Why not a chicken's, a goat's?" (121). Virginity, like colonial priority, suggests the text, is oftentimes only a post-facto invention.<sup>25</sup>

It is worth remembering here that Pipa's accusation of Corbin is instigated by a remark made by Rashid, Mariamu's stepfather. Rashid himself is characterized in the novel as someone who has an undue interest in Mariamu, making her do, in her own words, "evil things" (81). When Mariamu is raped and killed and her son Aku is to be found a guardian, her uncle Jamali refuses to let Mariamu's mother have custody over Aku as long as "that railway coolie Rashid hung around his sister." (193) By hinting at the possibility of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, and juxtaposing it to the possibly consensual but never confirmed liaison with Corbin, Vassanji's text once again returns to a sentiment expressed in *The Gunny Sack*. The greatest threat to Indian womanhood in colonial and postcolonial East Africa, may come not from

racial others (whether African or European) but from the Indian community itself.<sup>26</sup> While there is no investigation of her murder by the community, the narrator wonders towards the end of the text whether the family may have suppressed the investigation because they suspect the stepfather Rashid to have been responsible for it.<sup>27</sup>

The text never does reveal the mystery of the paternity of Mariamu's son Aku Ali, suggesting that pure genealogies of descent, like matters of virginity, may be more meaningful on the symbolic register than to matters of everyday living. For all practical purposes, suggests Vassanji, "Those living in the West are in some ways the children of Corbin. But they are also Indians and in that sense Pipa is very much their father. That is the real genealogy."<sup>28</sup> Colonial subjects are necessarily the products of hybridized cultures, and dis-entangling their inheritances in the name of national or ethnic pride goes against the grain of their entwined histories. The same is to be said about the lives of those such as Gregory who as British expatriates are conventionally read as being on the side of the colonizers, misfits in high colonial society though they may be. They too, have been hybridized over the years suggests the narrative, so that a Gregory can recite the Kalima along with the Muslim mourners at a student's funeral: "What point in asking him, taunting him, at the Barber's Club: Mr. Gregory, after independence, where next—South Africa? Where but Dar?" (280).

Colonial hybridity, inescapable though it may be, is an ambivalent inheritance. To Aku, being read as an "Oriental Prince" who is at the same time perfectly comfortable in English society is an excellent platform for upward mobility. In the process, however, he is increasingly inclined to shed his connections to the community, leaving those relations in the hands of his former wife Rita. For Gregory, the hybridity doesn't amount to much and when he dies, save for a few of his close school friends and students, his passing away is mainly an expatriate event. For young Jamali, hybridity, this time tellingly derived not from a British colonial inheritance but rather from part Indian ancestry, becomes a source of anger and pain. Colonial lives, the text insists, must be seen as relations of entanglements, but some entanglements are, to use an Orwellian phrase, "more equal than others."

Nonetheless, the nature of human entanglements, their perils and their pleasures is central to the narrative of *The Book of Secrets*. The pull between societal norms and personal desire means that when the latter triumphs, as is the case with the ill-fated affair between the Shamsi girl Parviz and the Hindu bookkeeper Patani, the former rears its ugly head. Taunted by the community for shaming both it and herself, Parviz commits suicide. The only route of pursuing such illicit love is an escape to

London, although in the case of Ali and Rita and another unnamed girl from Kariakoo who has run away with a boy from the Jafferi sect, it proves equally challenging in the long term. Those who follow tradition don't always seem to do better either—Ali's marriage with Sherbanoo, undertaken with full sanction of the community is loveless; Pius' engagement to a Goan girl, primarily made in the interests of pleasing his mother is short-lived; the young woman DeSouza gets engaged to jilts him for a higher officer; and the marriages of Pipa and Remti and arguably even of Feroz and Zaynab, though stable, seem more matters of convenience.

It is the love that dare not express itself, that in some cases does not even fully know itself, that holds the greatest emotional force in the novel. The mournful tradition of unrequited love, so much a part of the early Bollywood film industry, makes its mark on Vassanji's characters through the figure of Anarkali, a commoner who is considered in Indian legend as having been imprisoned in a cave by the Emperor Akbar because she was the object of his son Salim's desire. The figure of Anarkali links not only the story of Pius' attraction to his student Rita, who along with her classmates teases him about his own love interests, but it also connects to the story of Corbin and Mariamu, and Mariamu and Pipa, since, as Feroz reminds Pius, Corbin's diary, much like Anarkali, has for many years been sealed up in a cave, only to be later discovered so that its stories can be told. Pius' enchantment with his student Rita, much like Corbin's with Mariamu, is an enchantment seen as taboo by virtue both of its inter-communal nature and also of its professional impropriety. In spite of the students who recognize his interest in Rita and taunt him by echoing Anarkali's song, *Ye Zindagi Usiki Hai*—"The world belongs to the one who loves" (242), Pius chooses to submerge his desire, and over the years, to nurse a wound, as Rita puts it "that had no right to be there in the first place" (286).

Though Rita is apparently the immediate object of his desire, by introducing the ambivalences in the relationship between Gregory and Pius, Vassanji pushes the limits of Pius' own self-knowledge about his desires. Like Corbin's diary that encourages Pius to imagine intimacies between Corbin and Mariamu that may or may not be fully nameable, Rita's arrival in Dar es Salaam triggers in him a re-cognizance of his own intimacies. "What was between you and Gregory . . . only you know that. If you do," says Rita (297), thus suggesting that Pius's Anglophilia, whether or not fully acknowledged by him, may not have been one of a purely abstract order. Pius's own probings into the history of this relationship may leave him with a better appreciation for what Gregory has meant to him but ultimately he remains unsure about the precise nature of their intimacy. The final meaningful

contact between Pius and Gregory is an echo of the scene in which Corbin in high fever, feels the "smell, weight on the bed of another body"—that of Mariamu who is nursing him (82). In the case of Pius and Gregory, the reader is made privy to Pius's sensations of "being utterly alone, with another human being in [his] arms" as he too nurses Gregory, and spends the night with him on his bed (310). After this tender encounter, Gregory, like Corbin before him, is entrusted in the care of some ladies associated with the Church, and Pius paralleling Mariamu does not see much of him thereafter.<sup>29</sup>

In foregrounding the homosocial, if not homosexual, intimacies between Pius and Gregory, Vassanji's narrative is in keeping with a familiar tradition of colonial literary history, but once again, Vassanji's post-Manichean aesthetic will not allow for a simple substitution of homo over heterosexuality. Rather, the reading is tempered with a revelation from Gregory's own past that is discovered after his death. Read by his friends and acquaintances as a homosexual, Pius finds that Gregory has dedicated a collection of his poems to an "A.C." who "clearly was a woman" (318). He discovers a string of correspondence between Anne Corbin and Gregory, Anne's letters "becoming more open, admiring, and dependent towards the end" (325). This too, suggests Pius, is a relationship whose exact form of intimacy must remain open to speculation. Just at the moment when the text seems poised to radically question the heteronormativity of colonial romance, a heteronormativity that it has itself dramatized, it questions the Manichean call for dividing the world into a hetero- and homo- sexual order.<sup>30</sup>

Critics have often commented on the centrality of English books and writing, pointing to Corbin's and Turner's diaries, Corbin's published memoir, both his and his wife's letters, Sona's library research, and Gregory's book of poems, among others, in the novel. If *The Gunny Sack* was Vassanji's tribute to orality<sup>31</sup> and folklore, *The Book of Secrets* pays similar tribute to the written word. The circulation of literary texts, whether in the form of reviews of Gregory's poems, or the staging of George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (tellingly a play about the acquisition of "proper" English) in both the colonial context of Uganda as well as the postcolonial context of Fernandes's school, or the verses from Shakespeare that are surreptitiously exchanged between potential lovers, or the scenes of pedagogy where Gregory and Fernandes both teach their students canonical English texts, all point to the ways in which the culture of English letters pervades the narrative. In one sense this can be directly attributed to Vassanji's claim that the novel is a tribute to his teachers.<sup>31</sup> But in a larger sense I would argue that this affinity to the culture of colonialism is better understood as a more widely shared phenomenon, not



restricted, as one might be tempted to assume, to the upwardly mobile Indian middle class. In a compelling reflection and critique, Simon Gikandi has written about the seeming paradox that he witnessed growing up as a young Gikuyu man in the shadow of colonialism. Writing about the *Athomi*, the "people of the book," he writes, "you could tell them apart from those they had proclaimed to be their others not only by their European dress and European style houses, but also by their books, the books they held religiously on their way to church on Sunday, the books that filled their living rooms, the musty, yellowed textbooks in which they recorded their private lives and professional experiences." These individuals, writes Gikandi, often detested colonial rule, fought against it and yet passionately believed "in the efficacy and authority of colonial culture." They fought against colonial rule "not because they wanted to return to a precolonial past . . . but because they wanted access to the privileges of colonial culture to be spread more equitably, without regard to race and creed."<sup>32</sup> Such investment in the culture of Englishness from the standpoint of a nationalist agenda could only be held in contempt, but, writes Gikandi, "after several decades of independence in the former colonies, it has become evident that the nationalist desire for a radical rupture from the colonial past has failed, that nationalism cannot seriously be considered to be the alternative to the imperialism that it was once thought to be."<sup>33</sup> Postcoloniality, may well be the interpretive moment, suggests Gikandi, when we can come to terms with the continuing legacies of colonial culture "without guilt or recrimination."<sup>34</sup> This, then, is also ultimately the message of *The Book of Secrets*, a book of "half lives, partial truths, conjecture, interpretation, and perhaps even some mistakes. What better homage to the past than to acknowledge it thus, rescue it and recreate it, without presumption of judgment, and as honestly, though perhaps as incompletely as we know ourselves, as part of the life of which we are all a part?" (331-3, emphasis mine).

## Notes

1. Vassanji, M.G. (1994). *The Book of Secrets*. New York: Picador. All parenthetical citations are to this edition.
2. Coper, Frederick and Ann Laura Stoler eds. (1997). *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
3. Gikandi, Simon (1996). *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
4. See, for instance, Malak, Amin. "'The Empire Reads Back': M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*," *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2000): 175-183; Rhodes, Shane, 'Frontier Fiction: Reading Books in M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*,' *ARIEL*, 29, no. 1 (1998): 179-193; Jones, Stephanie. 'Within and Without History: *The Book of Secrets*,' in Ganguly, Debjani and Nandan Kavita eds. (1998). *Unfinished Journeys: India File from Canberra*. Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, pp. 71-89; Ball, John Clement. 'Locating M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*: Postmodern, Postcolonial, or Other-wise?' in Aziz, Nurjehaned. (2000). *Floating the Borders: New Contexts in Canadian Literatures*. Toronto: TSAR Publications, pp. 89-105; Romic, Biljana. 'The Book of Secrets or the Art of Intricate Interplay,' in Schaub, Danielle ed. (2000). *Mapping Canadian Cultural Space: Essays on Canadian Literature*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, pp. 71-82; Cumyn, Joanna. 'Reconfiguring the Nation: Intercultural Textuality and M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*,' in Rimstead, Roxanne, Michelle Aris, Simon Gilbert and Suzanne O'Connor eds. (2005). *Beyond Comparisons*. Coaticook, Canada: Les Editions Topeda Hill, pp. 201-209.
5. Kanaganayakam, Chelva (1991). "'Broadening the Substrata': An Interview with M.G. Vassanji," *World Literature Written in English*, 31, no. 2: 19-35 (31).
6. See Burton, Antoinette (2012). *Brown over Black: Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Citation*. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective; Siundu, Godwin, 'Imagining Manhoods: Voyeurism and Masculine Anxieties in East African Asian Fiction,' in Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Luisa Orza eds. (2008). *Negotiating Sexual Idioms: Image, Text, Performance*. Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, pp. 191-206; Ojwang, Dan (2013). *Reading Migration and Culture: The World of East African Indian Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
7. Stöler, Ann Laura (1995). *Race and the Education of Desire*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 191.
8. Gurnah, Abdulrazak (2005). *Desertion*. New York: Random House.
9. As Urbashi Barat notes, 'however, Pius' decision to leave Goa at the time of Indian independence is a little mystifying since Goa remained a Portuguese colony. He writes, "True, many Christians in Goa were close to the Portuguese colonialists, much more so than most other Indians were to the colonial British; but the old order for these Goans showed no signs of collapse in 1947. . . . Fernandes's decision to leave Goa/India, then, was clearly due to reasons or motives he does not acknowledge to himself even after all these years, preferring, rather, to ascribe it to the stereotypical choice of the hybrid comprador." Barat, Urbashi. 'Imagining India: M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*, Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, and Chitra Banerji Divakurni's *The Mistress of Spices*' in Chetty, Rajendra and Pier Paolo Piciuccio eds. (2004). *Indias Abroad: The Diaspora Writes Back*. Johannesburg: S. T. E. Publishers, pp. 89-103.
10. Vassanji, M.G. (1989). *The Gunny Sack*. London: Heinemann.
11. Just as one real-life example among many, Peter Nazareth remembers his own "deep disillusionment" on arrival at Leeds from Uganda: "I had never really imagined an industrial city like that. I'd read about it in Lawrence and Dickens but could not imagine England as nasty as that. Colonialism had persuaded us that England was a perfect



- place, a developed country where everybody was happy, had perfect knowledge, had good houses . . . Otherwise how were they ruling us?" See, 'Interview with Peter Nazareth,' in Lindfors, Bernth (1980). *Mazungumzo: Interviews with East African Writers, Publishers, Editors and Scholars*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, pp. 80-97.
12. Maynard tells Corbin that concubinage was a common practice among colonial officers in the past. A little later, Woodward, an ADC who visits him in Kikono tells him that "Concubinage is not tolerated any longer" (33). Whatever the precise nature of Corbin's relationship with Mariamu, it is certainly informed by these conversations. For a historical treatment of concubinage and its curtailment in British colonial life, see Hyam, Ronald. 'Concubinage and the Colonial Service: The Crewe Circular (1909),' *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 14, no. 3 (1986): 170-186.
  13. In writing of his relatively sympathetic treatment of colonial administrators, particularly Corbin, Vassanji has stated, "But the fact is that the British administrators too were human and I don't know if it is politically incorrect to say that." See, Kanaganayakam, Chelva (1995). 'M. G. Vassanji' in *Configurations of Exile: South Asian Writers and their World*, Toronto: TSAR Publications, pp. 127-137.
  14. And this, of course, is only to speak about the British. While we don't get a detailed portrayal of them, we cannot forget that the Germans are a central part of the novel too, since they are at war with the British.
  15. Vassanji, M.G. (2003). *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. New York: Knopf.
  16. Unlike in the case of Taratibu in *The Gunny Sack*, whose life after her abandonment from the community is relatively underdeveloped in the novel, Khanoum is clearly seen to carry on with pride and determination despite the serious setback that her husband's death has caused her. She politely but firmly refuses Corbin's offer of assistance in sending Aku to school and she also forbids Aku from demeaning himself by taking petty jobs at Corbin's household.
  17. Nonetheless, the scene in which Nyerere does appear shows him receiving generous financial support from Pipa, the latter in turn receiving a special invitation to the independence day celebrations.
  18. Rhodes, Shane (1997). 'M. G. Vassanji: An Interview,' *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 22, no.2 (1997): 105-117; (113).
  19. A detailed and compelling reading of the colonial male gaze in the novel and the possibilities of reading the text as proto-feminist has been offered by Alison Toron in, Toron, Alison (2009). 'Refusing to Tell: Gender, Postcolonialism and Withholding in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*,' *Postcolonial Text*, 5, no. 3 (2009): 1-15. Doi: <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/935/978>.
  20. In the case of Taratibu, the relationship is with an Indian man rather than a British colonial officer. Nonetheless the unequal power relations between the men and the women beg the question whether such relationships could ever be free of coercion.
  21. "S.R.: How similar did you see your own position in respect to Pius's?
  - M.G.V.: Not similar at all. Fernandes comes from the generation of my school teachers. In fact, *The Book of Secrets* is a tribute to my teachers, many of whom were Goans; the narrative is in empathy with that generation. Of course, this was a very different generation from mine and strained by differences of time and place." Op. cit. Shane, 'M.G. Vassanji,' pp. 108-9.
  22. See op. cit. Chelva (1995), pp. 127-137.
  23. Mernissi, Fatima (1982). 'Virginity and Patriarchy,' *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5, no.2 (1982): pp. 183-191.
  24. For instance, in a Letter to the editor defending the right of Indians to be in East Africa against the Settler rhetoric that disparaged them, Shamsud-Deen writes: "We were here long before the British came here." See Shamsud-Deen (April 4, 1939). 'Indians in Kenya,' *E.A. Standard* n.p. repr. in Salvadori, Cynthia. *We Came in Dhows*, 3 vols. Nairobi: Paperchase Kenya, vol. 2, 50.
  25. Shane Rhodes offers a compelling parallel reading of the de-mystification of colonial knowledge in the form of the missionary Turner's temporarily stolen diary. Notice the sexual metaphors here: "The crowd returns the book and Livingston releases Pipa, not realizing that the book's most precious attribute has been irrevocably lost: the book has been 'fingered' and 'peeped at,' . . . the realization that the book did not contain spirits but only inked words, demystifies and satirizes some of the importance that the 'wondrous object, the book' had held." See, Shane Roberts, 'Frontier Fiction,' p. 186.
  26. In *The Gunny Sack* the most egregious form of sexual violence against Indian women takes place in Nairobi by a gang of four Indian men who lure them into an empty warehouse only to gang-rape them, photograph the rapes and subsequently blackmail them. See, *The Gunny Sack*, pp. 262-3.
  27. It is worth noting that in popular discourses on skin pigmentation, North Indians and Punjabis in particular are often represented as being among the most light-skinned Indians. The fact that Aku is light skinned and has grey eyes is not (as Pipa notes) such an anomaly nor is it a clear indication of European paternity. If Mariamu has indeed been sexually abused by her Punjabi stepfather, he could easily be the potential father of the child.
  28. Op. cit. Chelva, p. 135.
  29. While I draw here on the parallels between the Corbin-Mariamu relationship, one may also consider the nature of the relationship between Corbin and Maynard. Maynard, the rougher, more iconoclastic and less "proper" Englishman is much the counterpoint to Corbin as Gregory is to Pius. Of the relationship between Corbin and Maynard, Pius writes, "In fact he was strangely drawn to the soldier, and joined him several times for drinks, until his posting came." (22)
  30. See here, Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
  31. See footnote 21 above.
  32. Op. cit. Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness*, p. xix.
  33. Ibid. p.7.
  34. Ibid. p. xx.