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Abstract
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Writing on and over Communal Boundaries: East African Asian Subjectivities in Sophia Mustafa’s *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga*

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*(In the Shadow of Kirinyaga) 236*

Sophia Mustafa’s *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* (2002) is a realist novel set in the mid-1930s in Kenya and Ethiopia. The main character Mussavir Bashir, a young East African Asian doctor, volunteers for the British Red Cross medical corps during the eight-month-long Italian-Ethiopian war that took place in 1935–1936: ‘Zaffer said the British were helping the Abyssinians by using the Red Cross in Kenya and East Africa. He said a small incident over the wells at Wal Wal had set all Europe aflame, so to speak’ (94). Before Mussavir leaves for the war, his parents arrange his engagement to Shaira, a precocious thirteen-year-old he comes to love. In Ethiopia, he suffers minor injuries and shellshock. As a coping mechanism he becomes addicted to alcohol and marries an Italian-Somali nurse, who looks after him and with whom he expects a child. To the Bashirs’ shame, the engagement to Shaira has to be dissolved and as a result Mussavir’s father, Dr Mohammed Bashir, disowns him. Even though Mussavir and Halima, his wife, return to Garissa in the North Eastern province, the family does not visit them. Heart-broken about the fate of her eldest son, Ayesha Bashir travels with her husband to India to find a husband for their daughter, Hibba, who tragically dies, because of Dr. Bashir’s haste to have her off his hands. Sabra, Shaira’s mother, also fears the communal censorship: ‘There would be considerable gossip and to crown it all, she herself would have to do a lot of explaining to her relations in India for the broken engagement’ (223). The novel ends with a pair of letters, one
in which Mussavir explains to Shaira what happened to him during the war and the other by Shaira in which she pessimistically asserts the powerful claims that culture and family have on her: ‘It is true that neither my family nor the law will allow me to do what I would like to. I am not free to make my own decisions’ (234). The narrative style of the novel can best be described as ethnographic, since the novel teems with thick descriptions of cultural and geographical landscapes. The reader encounters minute, metonymic descriptions of food, fabrics, wedding rituals, religious ceremonies, and landscapes.

One such instance of thick description focuses on two characters who engage in a brief conversation about tea. This quotidian and seemingly insignificant occurrence is a useful starting point for this essay on In the Shadow of Kirinyaga in which Mustafa explores the complex and often ambivalent pull on Eastern African Asians in the first half of the twentieth century to participate in several stagings of communal and national subjectivity: as colonial subjects of the British empire; as diasporic Indian secular (or religious) national subjects; and as participants in African nationalist independence movements. The small passage on tea gestures towards all three of these strands:

> When Mwangi presented the steaming tea in a cup and saucer on a small tray, Maaja Nai thanked him, smiling widely, ‘Asante sana! Hiyo ndio na chai mazuri! Hapana ya mazungu. Now that is what I call a good cup of tea. It’s not like the English tea,’ and winked at Mwangi. It was a common belief that the Europeans drank their tea lukewarm and weak, and not scalding hot and milky as it should be.

> Mwangi gave him a broad smile and thanked him profusely, saying, ‘Asante, Bwana Kinyozi’. (125)

The ambiguity of tea as a signifier for cultural and national affiliation becomes apparent in several ways in this passage. The most obvious is the shared joke between the Asian cook, Maaja Nai, and Mwangi, the Kikuyu servant of the household, about the lack of taste of English tea. This claim jars immediately as tea is often seen as an expression of Englishness and it holds an important place in its national imaginary. A brief excursion into the history of tea helps to explain how diverse groups come to see themselves as the ‘proper’ custodians of tea: it is assumed that tea was first discovered and actively cultivated in China and Burma and that it moved across to Ceylon and India very quickly in the way that produce travelled during the Indian Ocean trade. Tea was introduced at the English court in 1660 under Charles II, because his Portuguese wife was used to ‘taking her tea’ (brought to Portugal with the explorers in the mid-1500s). What this anecdotal history shows is that the claim to tea as a national signifier is unstable and relies on pre-colonial Indian Ocean trade as much as empire for its distribution and appropriation. What might seem a sign of empire, becomes in this passage a signifier of an Asian African solidarity as the characters stake their claim on their superior brewing method of tea. It also suggests a shared history as both are subjects of the British empire and their joke can be read as a small everyday
act of mockery. Furthermore, the way the two brewing methods are contrasted — hot and milky versus lukewarm and weak — suggests that Indian and African food preparation has become entangled over time, so that: ‘food becomes a cross-cultural denominator on the East African coast’ (Moorthy 76). Food, and in this instance, tea, travelled further inland from the Swahili coast and typically Indian dishes are now part of a staple East African diet.

It comes as no surprise that the humour of this passage is articulated in Swahili, because the most utopian moments, glimpses of connection across ethnic and cultural boundaries, are registered in Mustafa’s texts through the use of Swahili. She herself learnt to speak the language fluently only when she became a politician and had to give speeches across the Arusha province for the Tanganyika African National Union in the late ’50s and early ’60s. This political commitment to learn Swahili on her part can be read as an expression of solidarity and of staking a claim of belonging. Gayatri Spivak in ‘The politics of Translation’ speaks of the connection between solidarity and second language acquisition when she points out that ‘if you are interested in talking about the other, and/or making a claim to be the other, it is crucial to learn other languages’ (Spivak 192, [my emphasis]).

To downplay Asianness in favour of becoming African, characterises much of Mustafa’s memoir The Tanganyika Way. A Personal Story of Tanganyika’s Growth to Independence ([1961] 2009) and her own performance of citizenship, yet in this novel she focuses instead on coercive communal affiliations that restrict and define individual identity. Consequently, just like the possibilities and limitations of food to cross boundaries, the potential of learning the other’s language is presented in the novel as limited by the social realities of the time, for it must be kept in mind that Mwangi is the African servant of the family. In other words, while the passage, through Swahili, bridges a cultural divide, it nevertheless firmly reinscribes the colonial social positioning of the characters and reinforces boundaries of class and race, in which Asians occupy a relatively privileged position vis-à-vis Africans. While Asianness is an identity category that comes into being in the East African diaspora, Mustafa painstakingly portrays the fractures within this category as well, that is, the religious and cultural differences between groups that were important in India are recreated in the diasporic space and divide the Asian community. These internal divisions materialise in the inability of members of different castes to eat together: ‘The Brahmin guests came, greeted, and congratulated the bride and groom but left before the food was served’ (155). Or even to share a drink as is the case between two different sects of Shia Muslims: ‘In fact, the Ismailis, who were followers of the Aga Khan, would not even drink a glass of water from an Isthanashari home. So it was surprising that these two families were civil and polite to one another, and that both welcomed Sabra and her family’ (180). Again, separation is juxtaposed to a warm hospitality that transcends entrenched communal boundaries. Stephen Clingman in The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature
of the Boundary defines boundary as a site of demarcation and barrier and of transition and movement. The question is not whether boundaries exist, but rather ‘what kind of boundaries they are’ (4). Boundaries, according to Clingman, are not solely dividing lines between two or more sets of differences, but rather constitute transitory spaces that link various subject positions.

Such simultaneous contradictory impulses as explored above, I want to argue, lie at the heart of Mustafa’s fictional project. She intends, as stated in the first epigraph, to portray the cultural and political insularity of East African Asian communities while being highly critical of this unengaged and indifferent position. In this regard it is important to keep in mind that her own political investment in Tanganyika’s struggle for independence — which she documents in her memoir The Tanganyika Way: A Personal Story of Tanganyika’s Growth to Independence ([1961] 2009) — offers a critique of such insularity and internal politics of division in favour of claiming Africanness. Mustafa insists repeatedly that she considered herself as Tanganyikan, rather than a member of the Asian community, and, as I have argued elsewhere (Steiner, 2011), her cosmopolitan vision generates a productive tension in her narratives where subjectivity is conceived centripetally, where family, religion and caste/class define and constitute real boundaries and centrifugally, where the fault lines of such identificationary processes are laid bare. Like an ethnographer, who wants to capture in detail a way of life different to her own, Mustafa writes on and over the boundary of an identity politics that values ethnic identity over national affiliation and this makes her narratives a fascinating testing ground for interrogating diasporic subject formations. To write ‘on’ the boundary suggests an attentiveness to the various, very real social demarcations that contain and restrict the possibilities of agency of individual characters. This is complicated, however, by the movement of characters across boundaries, often precipitated by transnational trajectories over which they have little control. In other words, writing ‘on’ boundaries, for Mustafa inevitably means writing ‘over’ boundaries. Unlike the traditional ethnographer who, according to James Clifford, would localise ‘what is actually a regional/national/global nexus, relegating to the margins the external relations and displacements of a ‘culture” (24), Mustafa’s text is attentive to the itinerancy of cultural formations with its focus on the diasporic affiliations of East African Asians. In the face of a history of travel from India to East Africa, the narrative represents communal insularity as much as an aspiration as it is an unevenly enforced social formation. The narrative present that links Mussolini’s rise to power to Asians as pawns of the British empire exposes the difficulty with which the East African Asian community is able to define itself. Thus, Mustafa’s overtly-stated focus on East African Asians as first and foremost diasporic Indians interweaves at times with the other two strands of subject positions that were available to Asians in the early part of the twentieth century in East Africa: as colonial agents and as participants in African nationalist movements. James R. Brennan points out in this regard that most historical studies of Asians in East Africa only register the latter two in that they
employ analytical frameworks of anti-colonialism and African nationalism, ascribing to Indians the role of either nationalist heroes or colonialist collaborators. Indians could be both, but ... over much of the colonial period they were above all advocates of Indian secular and religious nationalisms, which overlapped in both fruitful and destructive ways with emergent African nationalisms. (Brennan 44)

Brennan thus emphasises the primary identificationary impetus as one of diaspora, where secular and religious nationalisms are expressions of strong ties to India, the original homeland, and only then do these intersect with local African concerns. This diasporic angle is emphasised in Mustafa’s fiction through the focus on family and communal life. In this way, her novels explore the claim of communal singularity in the fashioning of subjectivity that is based on religious and ethnic identifications that seek to foreclose, restrict and hive off the possibility of the many. The insularity of Asian groups in East Africa and the perceived lack of local contiguity that the novel emphasises, highlight an aspect of transnational diasporic formations that foregrounds stasis and seamless continuity between home and abroad. Diasporas can exhibit a ‘strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time, based on shared history, culture and religion’, and a ‘sustained network of social relationships with members of the group living in different countries of settlement’ (Bakewell 5). The historian, Richa Nagar, argues in ‘The South Asian Diaspora in Tanzania: A History Retold’ that despite the heterogeneity in background and experiences: ‘Asians as a whole ... largely remained socially, politically, and spatially isolated from their African neighbors’ (62). This view echoes Mustafa’s assertions quoted above about the cultural ‘walls’ between Asians and their local East African environments, a lack of connection that she attributes to ignorance and indifference. While Mustafa’s novels, particularly In the Shadow of Kirinyaga, capture the strong cultural ties to India in order to justify cultural and religious boundaries between groups of Asians, the narratives simultaneously write over such boundaries in portraying the heterogeneity that fracture cohesive notions of community from within. The boundaries that this essay engages with are boundaries of material culture, like food, attire, living conditions and the entanglement of language. All these become profoundly affected by the experience of war in the case of the main protagonist.

The writing on and over this boundary can be explored in relation to the two terms that Mustafa uses in the epigraphs mentioned at the start of this paper to frame her imaginative engagement with variously overlapping but also contestatory forms of belonging: ‘watertight cultural compartments’ and ‘containment’. At first glance, both concepts suggest the isolation of Asians in East Africa in fairly rigid ways. However, even the inward looking and bounded notion of subjectivity so vividly sketched by the term ‘watertight compartment’ simultaneously evokes a larger space within which the compartment is situated (that is, by definition a compartment can only exist in relation to the bigger space around it). Similarly, the centripetal, inward and bounded meaning of the term ‘containment’, that is ‘keeping something from spreading’ (wordnetweb.princeton.edu) has another
denotative meaning, which suggests the centrifugal movement into alliances that are directed outwards. This second meaning of containment propels the plot of *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* as it tells the story of a young Kenyan Asian doctor, Mussavir Bashir, who is a volunteer for the Red Cross medical corps during the Italian-Ethiopian war of 1935–1936 to support the Ethiopian side, even though the League of Nations did not officially condemn Mussolini’s invasion. In her acknowledgments page to *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga*, Mustafa remarks that the idea of writing a novel of containment was sparked by the intimate fate of two families that were directly affected by this war:

>I was old enough in the 1930s to be aware of what was called the Abyssinian War and the toll it took within the larger region, including its devastating effects on two Muslim families of second generation Asians living in Kenya during that period. (236)

In other words, the specific cultural practices of the families in the novel exist in a relational reciprocity to larger national and transnational trajectories and Mustafa’s text captures this through the juxtaposition of plot (that is regional and trans-continental) and minute detailed descriptions of food, clothes, wedding rituals that speak of strategies of cultural containment. What her narratives represent convincingly in this contrasting movement is the immense communal investment in a cultural tradition that creates the illusion of unchanging, watertight enclosures, but life itself (as narrativised by the plot structure) issues a challenge to such communal identity politics.

Social insularity and tradition are narrativised in detailed descriptions of religious beliefs and cultural practices, as expressed for example by Ayesha Bashir in a conversation with her son Mussavir about his possible engagement:

>“Traditions and customs have not changed, my son,” she said as she hurled her blue dupatta over her shoulder. She was wearing a blue printed shalwar kamiz’ (1). The text underscores the authority of these words by drawing the reader’s attention to the character’s traditional clothing to suggest the authenticity of her claims about culture. However, such claims of containment are challenged by the sheer terrain onto which they are mapped through the movement of the plot as characters travel voluntarily or by force from Nairobi to Addis Ababa from Nyeri to Delhi, and in her other novel, *The Broken Reed*, from Nyasaland to Rawalpindi. What particularly interests me is the way in which insularity conflates contradictory impulses in that it suggests circularity and circumscribed autonomy but also insists on diasporic connections beyond the insular in relations across regions and nations. The antinomy of the insular is formulated well by Antonis Balasopoulos in his essay, ‘Nesologies: Island Form and Postcolonial Geopolitics’, where he traces the discursive production of insularity throughout history with attention to the interplay between island geography and ideas of ideal states as ‘homogenous, sharply demarcated, and singular geopolitical identities’ (Balasopoulos 10–11). However, as he points out, the island also extends outward toward zones of otherness, where the island becomes a figure for colonial expansion.
The reading of her novel draws attention to the way in which the textural topographies of cultural and geographical landscapes result in spatial decentring even when it traces the insular shape and content of supposedly bounded cultural compartments. It is therefore important to pay attention to Mustafa’s cultural and geographical representation of the Eastern African landscape in the eyes of second generation of Asians in East Africa. I argue that through spatial decentring — by writing on and over boundaries — the fraught process of constituting community and tradition is laid bare.

Mustafa’s focus on facets of the everyday clearly establishes the link between the Asian community in Kenya and relatives in India, the place of origin and touchstone of cultural/religious and secular nationalisms. For example, the narrator describes the recreation of social space along ethnic lines directly inherited from India: ‘They all lived behind the shops, with an Ismaili jamatkhana, a tiny Muslim mosque, two Hindu temples of different denominations, and a Sikh gurdwara all nearby in the township, in a sort of watertight existence along ethnic lines, strictly following the culture and norms of India’ (19). What is fascinating in this regard, is that colonial city planning intersects and exacerbates internal divisions, by externally regulating the city space, particularly in Nairobi:

Through architectural zoning and legislation — pass laws — the colonialist British then embarked on a process that would later ensure that they had almost total control of the city in terms [of] who did or did not inhabit it. This decision of policing inclusion/exclusion was based on quasi-legal commissions that recommended racially based segregation of housing quarters that yielded distinctly separate housing for the minority whites who occupied the north and west of the city, followed by Asians (in the Indian bazaar) and then Africans (behind the railway quarters). (Siundu 263)

How this city layout polices and how it intersects with the Indian caste system, is captured in a conversation between Mussavir and two other young Asian doctors on their way to Ethiopia. It is useful to quote this passage in its entirety:

‘But even back in India we do not have access to many hotels,’ said Gopalan, ‘and I do not see it happening here. The British will never make the Europeans open their hotels to us, therefore we should do something ourselves.’

‘Would that not in a way be accepting separate racial development?’ asked Mussavir.

‘Well, we are already a caste-conscious society, so what difference will race separation make?’ said Gopalan.

‘I don’t agree. The existing hotels should be opened to all in a democratic society.’ Mussavir was emphatic.

‘It would be too risky, will be the argument,’ added Tara Chand.

‘What’s the risk?’ Mussavir questioned.

‘If they allow Asians they will also have to allow Africans,’ said Tara Chand. (171)

The conversation continues in a similar vein until Mussavir remarks that the legacy of the caste system compounds the attempts at segregation by the colonial authorities. The relative freedom to settle in certain areas of the city allowed
Indian diasporic communities to organise themselves in pretty much the same way as in India. Again Mustafa uses words like ‘enclaves’ and ‘compartments’ that separate various Asian communities (173). Dr Mohammed Bashir arrives with Ayesha in Kenya before WWI, and is recruited by the colonial government first to Nairobi and then to the district hospital in Nyeri. He home-schools all his children as there are no suitable schools in Nyeri and then sends his sons to India for tertiary study. In contrast to the home-schooling in Nyeri, Nairobi offers schools for all religious communities in an area similarly spatially demarcated as the living arrangements mentioned above:

A few Indian girls’ religious and private schools were located in that area. There was the Muslim Girls School behind the bus station in the area known as Gian Singh’s Shamba. And on the other side of Race Course Road, where it joined Duke Street, was the Sanatan Dharam Girls School as well as the Sanatan Dharam Temple. Behind that stood the Sikh Girls School as well as the huge imposing Singh Sabha Gurdwara with its grand round dome in black and gold. The Arya Samaj Girls School and the Aray Samaj itself were also not too far from there. The early pupils, all girls escorted by father and brothers, headed to their various institutions. Their saris and trouser suits made a spate of colour: the white suits and yellow chunnis of the Sikh girls, the colourful turbans of their fathers and brothers, the pink saris of the Sanatan girls, and the deeper yellow saris of the Arya Samaj girls intermingled. There were no religions or private schools for boys. They all attended the Government Indian Boys Primary and Secondary Schools, which were at the other end near the main railway station.

What is interesting, and where Mustafa locates her critique, is that the ethnic demarcations do not seem to play such a significant role in the education of boys: in other words, women are seen as the carriers of cultural tradition and thus have to be shielded from too much interaction with other communities. In ‘Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence against Women in Africa’, Amina Mama similarly asserts that women are frequently perceived as ‘the bearers and upholders of traditions and customs, as reservoirs of culture’ (Mama 54). Curiosity about other cultural practices in girls is discouraged, though the text shows that this boundary cannot be easily policed as the girls relish the Hindu wedding they attend, and their neighbours, who are Shia Muslims, invite them to celebrate a majlis with them during Muharram, where they learn to recite marcas (197–201).

Religious continuity is further undermined by the generational gap that the text explores between Mussavir and Dr. Bashir, his father: ‘Mussavir was of a different generation. He was not a bad Muslim but could not adhere strictly to all the tenets of the faith. He had started smoking when in college and had also ventured to taste alcoholic drinks, absolutely forbidden by Islam’ (22). Interestingly, as a result of shellshock he turns to alcohol as a coping mechanism. This outrages his father, Dr. Bashir: ‘He knows I shall never forgive him even if Allah does. My whole life’s work undone. I have all my life been a devout and God-fearing Muslim, and to have produced a son who has become an alcoholic! I don’t ever want to see
him again’ (222). The narrative sympathy lies with Mussavir’s predicament and several characters comment on Dr. Bashir’s intolerant and authoritarian manner to criticise his notion of religious purity which makes him such a forbidding person who clearly does not understand that crossing the boundary between war and peace irrevocably shifts the ground under Mussavir’s feet.

In order to keep the ties between the diaspora and India alive, transnational travel and in particular, transnational marriage arrangements are the order of the day. Thus, the text draws the readers’ attention to the fact that for this middle class family, travel between Kenya and India is quite a regular affair, and several marriages are arranged during these travels. The novel spends a lot of time discussing wedding arrangements and ceremonies. There is a big Hindu wedding in Nyeri to which the Bashir and Shaira families are all invited. The reader is also told about the Geet ceremony, the Hindu wedding in all its detail, (even songs are discussed at length in the text), which compares more favourably to the practices of Muslim weddings, as Mussavir muses: ‘During the ceremony Mussavir could not help comparing the Hindu marriage ceremony and rituals to Muslim practices. He always found the Muslim rituals had a sense of sombreness about them. No fun or glamour, or even colour’ (74).

The novel cuts across these demarcations, while still paying attention to the asymmetrical relations of power, when it links the Asian community to its African surroundings, which it captures most extensively in the interactions with servants and registers in the text through the frequent use of Swahili. In fact, the interactions in Swahili draw the family members and the servants into a shared reality, even if they reify hierarchical relations, as revealed in the passage on tea. For example, much of the humour is found in such moments of exchange, often at the expense of the British:

The man [Kikuyu chicken seller] hummed and hawed, saying he had walked from across three ridges without breakfast and this was his first sale of the day. He needed the money to pay the kodi tax.

‘Kweli?’ asked Ayesha.

‘Absolutely true Mama, haki ya Mu…’ He raised his right hand but had not finished his sentence when Mussavir, standing at the window, completed the man’s sentence: ‘haki ya mzungu?’ Mugro and Ayesha burst out laughing. The old man looked at the window and laughed loudly, then wiped his eyes with his free hand and said, ‘Haki ya Mungu. Hapana mzungu!’ I swear by God, not the Europeans, as you jest!

They all laughed. Asians and Africans, when not telling the truth, sometimes used the Swahili word for European instead of God when affirming or swearing.

‘All right Mzee, you have made me laugh so early in the morning. I’ll buy all your chickens and you can have a mug of hot tea.’ (39)

While these examples are not unproblematic in that they elide the differences in status for the sake of poking fun at the British, they nonetheless show that the characters are at least fluent in the language of their surroundings. This entanglement of languages due to living in close proximity exerts a subtle pressure
on Asians to engage with their African surroundings, to affirm their Africanness, and in the text, Mustafa shows how the children of the household had picked up some words of the indigenous languages spoken by their servants: ‘The children picked up a lot of Luo words from him. The Kikuyu words and phrases learnt from Mwangi and Mama Wanjiro, like ‘Ati rey rey, nekwaga nmo,’ were replaced by ‘O mera! Idi Kanye. Kel bando, odek!’ and so on’ (181). By the same token, the servants also pick up words in Indian languages.

The most prominent challenge to the insularity of Asians in the text is registered through the war in Ethiopia. Mussavir is one of many East African Asian doctors who have volunteered as medical personnel for the International Red Cross: ‘Mussavir qualifies as a medical doctor in Delhi at just about the time that Mussolini’s armies invaded Abyssinia. He returned to Kenya to join the medical department like his father. The Red Cross Society was recruiting volunteer doctors to help in Abyssinia’ (6). It is actually Mussavir’s father, Dr. Bashir, who puts Mussavir’s name on the list of volunteer doctors with the view that this would aid his son’s advancement within the ranks of the medical department. However, after tragedy befalls the family, others judge his lack of insight: ‘Bhai Bashir is, I am sorry to say, a hard man. With all his piety and regularity in prayers and whatnot, he lacks sensitivity. Look how he first sent Mussavir to this Abyssinian war so soon after his studies’ (227). The contrast in this passage between ‘hardness’ and ‘sensitivity’ attributes the former to an overtly traditional piety that does not see the human cost, especially in relation to war. This eight-month war caused a lot of movement of peoples across the East African landscape in both directions — towards and away from the conflict. Early on in the narrative, for example, the Asians send their families to relatives in safer regions: ‘Badru’s wife said some of their relatives, business people in Addis Ababa and Mogadishu, were sending their women and children to Kenya’ (20). But the other direction is equally well travelled:

They said since the crisis developed, every train from Djibouti goes loaded with its quota of adventurers, journalists, and mercenaries, as well as genuine volunteers of all kinds. Like moths around a lamp, they are pouring into the country despite embargoes and difficulties. All kinds of European, Slav, and even Turkish mercenaries have surfaced. (176)

Mussavir’s itinerary, like those of the travellers mentioned in the quote above, is complex. First, he takes a train from Nairobi to Mombasa, where he boards a ship to Djibouti. After a further five-day train journey, he arrives in Addis Ababa. As his letters to Shaira suggest, he is a keen observer of landscape and people (again, the question of language is interesting as he writes to her in Urdu, so she can practice the language). The Italian warfare during these eight months is ferocious and it has been amply documented that gas was used against military but also against civilian targets despite the fact that Italy had signed the Geneva Convention in 1925 (Labanca 8; Gooch 1022). The novel points out that East
Africans were very well informed that the lack of help from Britain and France bolstered Italy’s confidence: ‘[W]ould the Italians have dared to attack in the first place if they thought the Great Powers and the League of Nations were really going to help Abyssinia?’ (145). These geopolitical forces directly impact on Mussavir’s experience of the war, because his medical camp is bombed and he barely survives the attack: ‘Mussavir was in an air-raid shelter when a bomb fell into it and killed one of his assistants. Mussavir rushed out screaming and dragging the body of the man, whose guts were hanging out of his split belly’ (212). The text dwells on many atrocities that took place in this war and it seems to me that it propels the characters quite forcefully and literally out of the security of cultural enclaves, or rather, that it exposes the artifice of containment and immutability suggested by such cultural identifications — hence the fact that Shaira is just as affected by the consequences of the war as is Mussavir. While Dr Bashir volunteers his son as an expression of his sense of duty to the colonial government, the consequences of this action prevent Mussavir’s stellar career in the medical field, but more crucially it prevents his re-insertion into the diasporic Asian community of which he was previously a part, in fact, it could be suggested that he is more ‘African’ after the war than he ever was before.

To conclude, In the Shadow of Kirinyaga is a complex exploration of the boundaries of communal processes of identity formation that are nevertheless traversed in multiple ways. I stated in the introduction to this essay that one can speak of three strands of subject formations that were available to East African Asians in the first half of the twentieth century: that of colonial subjects, of Indian diasporic subjects and as participants in African independence movements. What the subsequent analysis of Mustafa’s narrative shows is that this threefold schema is rather crude when applied to the lived experience of her characters in which these strands converge and diverge in multiple ways. Even though it could be said that the central identificationary force is one of diaspora, of insularity and containment, the novel imaginatively destabilises and decentres this force. This is achieved mainly through the movement of plot that is trans-regional and transnational in the novel. In other words, once the characters are on the move, even if only briefly from their house to their neighbours’ house, or through their communication with Africans in Swahili, but more prominently in their journeys through East Africa, the claim of singular identities is unmasked as untenable. These conflicting impulses generate a productive tension in Mustafa’s narratives where subjectivity is conceived centripetally, where family, religion and caste/class define and constitute real boundaries and centrifugally, where the fault lines of such identificatory processes are laid bare.

NOTES

1 Sophia Mustafa (1922–2005), novelist and political activist of South Asian origin, was one of Tanganyika’s first women members of parliament for the Tanganyika African National Union active in the transition from a British administered trust territory to
independent Tanzania under Julius K. Nyerere in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her published work comprises a non-fictional memoir of her time in politics *The Tanganyika Way: A Personal Story of Tanganyika’s Growth to Independence* ([1961] 2009) and two novels *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* (2002) and *Broken Reed* (2005) that were published forty years after the memoir.

2 In the East African context, *Asian* refers exclusively to peoples ancestrally from the Indian subcontinent.

3 I see Mustafa’s effort to learn Swahili as directly connected to her investment in the political struggle for Tanganyika’s independence: ‘When Sophia is selected as the official TANU candidate for the Northern Region she begins also a personal journey of becoming invested in the lives of others that she knew so little about and at the heart of this journey lies her effort to learn Swahili fluent enough to be able to communicate without the help of a translator’ (Steiner 143).

4 Especially *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* reads at times like an ethnographic account of various rituals and ceremonies accompanied by detailed descriptions of material culture.

5 The idea of singular identity versus many identities comes from Stephen Clingman’s *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*: ‘A way of thinking about the contemporary world is to see it under two competing descriptions and tendencies, of the many and the one… That tendency to the one or singular is consistent in its orientation: a way of ruling out transition, change, interaction, modulation, morphology, transformation’ (5).

6 There are many dishes mentioned, often accompanied by thick descriptions of spices, condiments and ways of cooking: parathas, katlama, kebabs, samosas, bhajias, farsan, mithai, dhoklas, ugali, urio, chapattis, curry, toast, eggs, roasted maize, moongi dal, dates, candy, laddus, gulabjamuns, barfi, puris, fruitcake, mathews, shakkar parats, kofta, chutney, fruit salad, mutton korma, sufuria of zarda, nan, to name some of them.

7 Richa Nagar’s research on marriage practices yields interesting information regarding whether wives are found in India or in East Africa: ‘My interviews revealed that most Ismaili, Ithna Asheri, Bohora, Lohana, Bhatia and Vaniya men who settled in Tanganyika and Zanzibar as traders during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, returned to Kutch, Kathiawar and Gujarat to marry women of their communities. However, many laborers from Sunni and Baluchi communities and a few from the Ismaili and Ithna Asheri communities among the early settlers, as well as many Ramgharia Sikhs, among the latter immigrants (most of them being ‘ex-coolies’) could not afford to return ‘home’. They therefore either married, or lived with African, Arab, or ‘half caste’ women. Some of these ‘mixed couples’ were accepted by the husbands’ communities and severed links with their African or Arab kin. However, most were rejected by their Asian communities’ (64).

WORKS CITED


