

## Dealing with Another Culture's Ghosts: Mariamu, Diaspora and Contact Zones in M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*<sup>1</sup>

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Stuart Hall, in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," reminds us that the old, imperialist and hegemonic definition of diaspora refers "to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea" (244). Hall goes on to describe the diasporic experience as marked by difference, transformation, and hybridity, and he challenges us to conceptualize diaspora in a manner that does not depend upon the centrality of the homeland. At the same time, we must not erase distinctions between various forms of transnational mobility and displacement. While diasporic and immigrant experiences can be similar, they are not necessarily interchangeable; not all immigrants are members of diasporic communities, and not all members of diasporic communities are immigrants. In order to be identified as a diaspora, at least one outside force—such as imperial power, colonial authority, natural catastrophe or economic, social or political upheaval—must be present.<sup>2</sup> M. G. Vassanji is an author whose fiction illustrates this difference between immigration and diaspora by focusing on characters, like Mariamu in *The Book of Secrets*, who exist on the margins of Shamsi society and show how the Shamsis' ethnic identity, while enduring in the diaspora, becomes transformed as it comes into contact with other ethnicities and cultures.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Smaro Kamboureli for her assistance, patience, and support in helping me complete this project.

<sup>2</sup> Diasporic narratives are not just histories of people being subjected to these forces; they are also records of a people's reactions to these forces and cultural memories of past traumas.

<sup>3</sup> Much of Vassanji's fiction is also multigenerational in scope, which also shows how the Shamsis' identity is transformed in the diaspora as it comes into contact with different cultures and different ethnicities. Here, we see a deliberate tactic within the narrative that moves the notion of Shamsi identity—if we can speak of such a thing without conjuring the specter of essentialism—away from a definition rooted in quintessential Indian-ness or Afro-Indian-ness or British-Educated-Afro-Indian-ness and towards an identity bounded by place, time, and difference. Salim Juma, the narrator in Vassanji's first novel, *The Gunny Sack* (1989), describes his great-grandfather's migration from India, identifies his great-grandmother as an African slave, and follows the family through four generations. And yet, the narrative perspective in *The Gunny Sack* does not dwell on the origin of the Shamsi community.

In his third novel, *The Book of Secrets* (1994), Vassanji's multigenerational narrative spans seventy-five years and three generations. The narrator, Pius Fernandes, uses the 1913 diary of a former British Assistant District Commissioner (ADC) to reconstruct the history of the Shamsi community in Kikono, a fictional town near the border of Tanganyika and British East Africa. Thus, we get overlapping perspectives presented to us in the first half of the novel, which do not depict the original homeland as a defining feature of Shamsi identity. Instead, the novel exemplifies what Mary Louise Pratt calls contact zones: "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations" (6). While focusing on Mariamu, I will argue that the Shamsis' diasporic identity is constituted not through its relationship to a homeland, but rather through its continual interactions with other identities around them. If Kikono is, as I argue it is, a "contact zone," then what determines Shamsi identity in this novel is not a remembered or reconstructed origin but how origins dissolve when a character resides on various socio-cultural borders.

The first half of *The Book of Secrets* makes it abundantly clear that socio-cultural borders and their negotiation determine the characters' lives. This part of the narrative focuses on Mariamu, one of the novel's key figures. Her uncle is the founder of Kikono and mukhi of the local Shamsi community, which would suggest that she might have a special status in the community; nevertheless, though a Shamsi and related to the local leader, she resides on the periphery of the community.<sup>4</sup> Mariamu's physical attributes differentiate her from the other women in Kikono. She is taller, thinner, fairer, with a "long oval face, the chin and cheekbones, the long nose—not the round features of the shopkeepers' wives" (Vassanji 104). Her mother's apparently disastrous remarriage to Rashid is one reason why Mariamu is on the periphery of the Shamsi community. Her behaviour, as I shall mention later, is atypical; she does not act in a manner ascribed to her by the gendered Shamsi community at key points in the novel.<sup>5</sup> And the family's social status is yet another factor that makes Mariamu a marginal figure. Her stepfather is "a former railway coolie (therefore strictly speaking not one of the Shamsis)" (Vassanji 50). Thus, a socio-cultural border between Shamsi and non-Shamsi appears within Mariamu's family. As a "daughter of the community," she is entitled to membership (Vassanji 70), but community membership encompasses more than just religious belief and practice; it is associated with a non-nostalgic relationship to the homeland. Although Mariamu's stepfather is a "Shamsi" character in Kikono who longs to return to India,

<sup>4</sup> In *The Book of Secrets*, Vassanji defines the role of a mukhi in a glossary: "mukhi—a spiritual and temporal leader of a Shamsi community, whose duties are performed voluntarily" (Vassanji 336).

<sup>5</sup> While a detailed analysis of the gender social roles within the Shamsi community is beyond the scope of this paper, there is often an overlap—a confluence—of socio-cultural contact zones and the social roles with the Shamsis' patriarchal society.

the other Shamsi characters in the novel do not. Instead, they are intent on negotiating their ethnic particularities with various groups around them.

It is clear then that Vassanji's novel presents us with a form of diasporic identity that is not dependent upon homeland. The Shamsis, to borrow Stuart Hall's words, "constantly produce and reproduce themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (244). And these transformations and differences appear along various socio-cultural borders of the community, especially those of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, language, social status and class. Socio-cultural borders are, to a certain degree, unfixed since they relate to ethnicity and ethnic identity. Rey Chow writes that "[e]thnicity signifies the social experience which is not completed once and for all but which is constituted by a continual, often conflictual, working-out of its grounds" (143). Thus, the socio-cultural border becomes the site where ethnicity is worked out, and these borders are crucial to the survival and cohesion of the community. Without them, ethnic differences would be erased as the larger population in the host region subsumes the diasporic community.

At this point, I must note that, in Vassanji's writing, the Shamsis are a fictional group. In the "Author's Note" that accompanies *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji states that "[t]he Shamsi community is fictitious" (Vassanji iv). It is, however, modeled on a real community, the Khoja Ismailis. Moreover, despite Vassanji's claim that the Shamsis in his book are fictional, there is a group with that name—though there is no evidence that the real Shamsis migrated from the regions where they live. As Farhad Daftary notes, "[t]he Nizari community of the Shamsis, who now acknowledge the Agha Khan and live as goldsmiths chiefly in Multan and elsewhere in Panjab, claim to have been converted to Nizari Isma'ilism by Pir Shams al-Din" (478-9).<sup>6</sup> Pir Shams al-Din is an important figure in Ismaili history because he converted many Hindus to Ismailism in the fourteenth century. In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji associates the origin of the Shamsis to a different individual: "[h]is name was Shamas, and they called themselves Shamsis" (7). The fictional Shamsis in Vassanji's fiction come from Junapur, a town in Gujarat, one of the regions from which the Khojas migrated. Nevertheless, the diasporic trajectories and relationships to the homeland are similar for both the fictional Shamsis and the real Khojas:

Khoja Ismailis Muslim diasporic communities in East Africa, the Caribbean, and North America that emigrated under the leadership of Aga Khan III in the nineteenth century from Kutch, Sindh, Katiawar, and Gujarat do not necessarily accord much

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<sup>6</sup> We should note that the real Shamsis would have been considered a fringe or marginal Ismaili group because, as Daftary implies, they did not recognize the Aga Khan as their spiritual and temporal leader for an unspecified period of time. Apparently, the community takes its name from Shams al-Din's mausoleum, "locally known as that of Shams-i Tabriz" (Daftary 478). Thus, the name "Shamsi" suggests that this small community accorded Pir Shams al-Din as much importance as the Ismaili Imam.

importance to connections with South Asia, making questions of looking back to India as a homeland irrelevant, or at best inappropriate. (Baziel and Mannur 9)<sup>7</sup>

Key differences between the Khoja Ismailis and their fictional counterparts are the leadership of Aga Khan III and the Khoja Ismailis' active involvement in the building of the British Empire. Vassanji states, "[i]f I were to write about a real religious group, then my dates would have to be exactly right" (Rhodes, "Interview" 117); however, if he did that, then his characters' relationship to the British Empire and its representatives would change. The ambivalence the characters feel toward the British during the war would not be realistic because the Aga Khan III sided with the British and urged "his followers to aid the British authorities in their territories" (Daftary 521). Instead, Vassanji is able to dramatize the way "subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" (Pratt 7) by positioning the Shamsis in a contact zone and conceptualizing their diasporic experiences. He does this by placing Mariamu, a key figure in the Shamsi community, in a marginal position. Mariamu moves from "daughter of the community" to outcast and back and, and by doing so, she embodies the community's social and cultural boundaries. By examining the strategies Vassanji uses to characterize Mariamu, I hope to demonstrate the ways diasporic identity is defined in relation to socio-cultural borders as they are presented in *The Book of Secrets*.

Mariamu in Relation to Colonial Authority and the Shamsis  
A crowd gathers as Alfred Corbin,<sup>8</sup> the new colonial administrator assigned to Kikono, approaches the town: "[t]he Indians formed a straighter line, the Swahilis stirred" (Vassanji 28). The differences between the various ethnic groups in Kikono dramatize how this town is marked by socio-cultural borders. Kikono, a small town near the borders of the German Tanganyika colony and British East Africa, contains two

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<sup>7</sup> While Jana Evans Baziel and Anita Mannur's observations about Ismaili identity reflect the attitude towards India at the turn of the twenty-first century, there is evidence that some Ismailis are beginning to look back at their Indian roots, and Vassanji's recent work appears to reflect this trend. His comments in a recent interview are pertinent: "[n]o politician or demagogue can take the Tanzania or Africa out of me; but I also have India in me, in my other languages, my ancestral history, the food I eat" (Nsekela). Furthermore, Vassanji's latest work, the novel *The Assassin's Song* and the non-fiction book *A Place Within*, shows an interest in exploring this India. Perhaps India's recent economic growth and its status as the world's largest democracy may have something to do with this renewed interest, this reconnection with South Asia within the Ismaili Community. Perhaps the current state of Canadian multiculturalism—with its emphasis on "origins," the place where one's ancestors are from—has something to do with the renewed interest in India too. Nevertheless, Vassanji's interest in his Indian roots does not appear to be a return to some pre-sanctioned "origin" because he insists on a double "origin," an India and an Africa, that reflects part of the diasporic trajectory of the Khoja Ismailis.

<sup>8</sup> The name "Corbin" is significant because it alludes to the famous French Islamist, Henry Corbin, who was one of the first Western scholars to study Ismailism.

distinct groups of Asians, the Shamsis “in white drill suits and red or black fezzes,” and other Asians in “dhotis and turbans” (Vassanji 26). Among the Africans, the narrator identifies the Swahilis, “in kanzus and embroidered caps,” local tribesmen and women and servants and labourers (Vassanji 26). Thus, Kikono society is stratified. The British are the colonial masters while the Africans are at the bottom, and the Asians occupy the middle-class position. Shane Rhodes, in his essay on *The Book of Secrets*, writes:

[F]rom the start this sets up some interesting paradoxes emblematic of the society of East Africa itself where there exists no simple binary of “slave and master” but rather a three-part structure (and even this simplifies a much more heterogeneous society) of relations between the British whites, “immigrant” Indians, and indigenous blacks. (“Frontier Fiction” 182)

The apparently pluralistic appearance of the town, however, is actually a product of British colonialism: “[b]y its very structure, colonialism is regionalist and separatist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces and separates them” (Fanon 94). Thus, the straighter line that the Indians form reflects their complicity with and dependence upon the colonial system. In other words, the Indians have a stake in impressing Corbin. In contrast, the stirring of the Swahilis reflects their unease and represents a form of resistance to the ceremonial displays and the pomp and pageantry so often associated with the British Empire.

Dress and behaviour during Corbin’s arrival mark the socio-cultural boundaries between African and Asian, Swahili and Shamsi. Mariamu appears in this scene, but she hovers on the edge of the crowd as a ghostly figure who attracts Corbin’s attention. Pius Fernandes does not name this figure when she first appears; however, other descriptions of this character’s appearance and behavior coincide with her description. Nevertheless, when she appears, Pius Fernandes’s narrative perspective shifts from that of a distant and detached observer to one that sees through Alfred Corbin’s eyes. He reports:

[T]his was what appeared to the new ADC as he approached the town: fleeting glimpses caught between bush and tree and anthill—a figure draped in white, dashing from left to right, cutting across his path in the distance. It could have been a man in kanzu but for the black hair flying, the lithe movement, the nimble step ... then a red head-cover over the hair to complete the female figure. So amazed was he by the sight that he had stopped to watch. She disappeared behind an incline, where he was told lay the settlement[.] (Vassanji 28)

This passage is constructed through a rhetorical strategy of ambivalence: anthills, bushes and trees as well as lithe and nimble movement obscure the figure, leaving Corbin with only fleeting glimpses of the woman, and he cannot be certain about what or whom he sees; the figure could be male or female, African or Asian, human or—as Corbin notes in his diary—“an apparition” (Vassanji 29). Ambivalence reinforces the perception that socio-cultural borders are fluid; furthermore, the description of Mariamu

as an apparition is significant because it not only alludes to the shetani that appear later on, but it also identifies her as a figure capable of flaunting the Shamsis's preconceived gender roles; she does what no other woman does and moves about in the background, haunting Corbin. Moreover, this scene invests her with agency, marks her as one capable of crossing the socio-cultural borders that separate the Shamsis from other ethnic groups in Kikono precisely because the apparition represents the unconstrained, the supplemental, the excessive; it is always already at the edge of socio-cultural borders.

To return for a moment to the scene I cited earlier, Corbin approaching Kikono, the figure that he sees could be a man in kanzu, a white cotton smock usually worn by Africans, suggesting the blurring of ethnic distinctions. The type of clothing mentioned suggests that Mariamu's representation will also blur the distinctions between Swahili and Indian. In fact, her behavior is closer to that of the Swahilis than to that of the Indians. As we have seen, the Indian townspeople are orderly; they have lined themselves up on the edge of the road. The Swahilis, however, are part of the crowd but are not as orderly. Like the Swahilis, Mariamu represents motion with the potential to disturb what is considered normative in this community. Thus, Vassanji creates subtle distinctions among three groups: the European, the Swahili, and the Indian. At the same time, he indicates that the Indians are not a homogenous group. One of Alfred Corbin's diary entries unpacks the Indian category: "[r]oughly half the Indians belong to the Shamsi sect of Islam and have a separate mosque. [...] There are also Hindu, Punjabi, and Memon families, but quite often the distinction blurs" (Vassanji 35). The socio-cultural borders that separate these Indian communities do not signify either pure otherness or heterogeneity. By representing Kikono as a contact zone, Vassanji challenges the conventional notion that diasporic communities are cohesive. Corbin's understanding and interpretation of Kikono's non-cohesiveness reinforces the ambivalence that blurred distinctions or hazy socio-cultural borders create. For example, he does not mention that there are separate mosques for the Sunni Swahilis and the Shi'a Shamsis; nonetheless, he recognizes a religious dimension to the socio-cultural borders drawn between the Shamsis and the other communities in Kikono.

Mariamu inhabits various socio-cultural borders by separating herself from Corbin and the townspeople, and other passages in the novel further emphasize this perception: "there was a wild look about her" (Vassanji 48), and "[t]he girl is wild[. . .] She's inclined to go away by herself and the family is worried" (Vassanji 50). Wildness represents the unconstrained and excessive. In relation to the paradigm of British colonialism, wildness would also characterize the uncivilized and savage, which Mariamu embodies through her tendency to move away from community. Her family, however, want to constrain her behavior and see her brought back into the fold. While the agent of the family's control over her is her stepfather Rashid, who spies on her when she is working as

Corbin's housekeeper and living in his house, the agent of the community's control is Mariamu's uncle Jamali, the founder and mukhi of Kikono, who exercises social control through the institution of marriage.

The mukhi betroths Mariamu to Pipa, a recent convert and merchant from the nearby town on the German side of the border. The mukhi says, "[Pipa], too, has problems, but inshallah, God willing, they can give happiness to each other" (Vassanji 51). The logic behind the mukhi's comment indicates that the institution of marriage would normalize Mariamu and Pipa. Marriage will control Mariamu's wildness, while making Pipa less of an outsider by diminishing his status as a recent convert and "former street urchin, without even the dignity of a father's name to attach to his" (Vassanji 104). Because marriage brings individuals, families and, to a lesser extent, communities together, it is employed as a means of establishing affiliations. Thus Pipa's and Mariamu's marriage promises to change their status within the community: they are "[t]wo people with incomplete, lowly origins—orphans, really. They had to make it, together. Together, they were inviolable. They had respectability, were a family" (Vassanji 106). In other words, the respectability associated with families entitles two individuals, both of whom are fatherless, to full membership in a patriarchal Shamsi society.

Mariamu's wedding is not an exclusively Shamsi affair: "[a]ll sat on the floor facing the mukhi, except the ADC, who stood in the doorway. He knew he was not allowed in, yet he watched with an obstinacy they did not know how to handle" (Vassanji 85). This scene unfolds through a rhetoric of inversion: this time it is Corbin and not Mariamu who is obstinate and behaving inappropriately by watching a ceremony he should not be allowed to witness; it is Corbin who marks the socio-cultural border that prohibits foreigners from entering the mosque and witnessing the Shamsis' rituals. We should also acknowledge that Corbin's position as a colonial administrator makes him impossible to handle. Usually, Mariamu behaves in a manner that not only differentiates her from Alfred Corbin but also reinforces socio-cultural borders that separate the Shamsis from others. During her wedding ceremony, however, it is difficult for her to exist as a peripheral figure when the community's attention centres on her.

Therefore, she becomes a figure who marks the socio-cultural boundaries because she not only exists on the periphery of the community but also appears to be remarkably unlike the other Shamsi women: "[h]er features were markedly distinct from the other women's, so that she seemed an outsider of some sort: tall and thin, fair, with long face, pronounced nose, full lips" (Vassanji 43). Physical appearance, however, is not the only thing that separates Mariamu from the other Shamsi women. She moves from the margins to the centre of the community at a dance during a festival where the women "enacted the first conversions of the community from Hinduism, several centuries ago in Gujarat"

(Vassanji 42).<sup>9</sup> The origins of the Shamsis survive through ritual, and Corbin watches Mariamu perform in it:

The circle of women had broken, a few of the younger ones were dancing solo, and in between them danced this siren. The tabalchi-drummer beat faster and the agile dancers kept time, feet thumping, hips gyrating without inhibition, breath drawn sharply, faces glistening with sweat. (Vassanji 43)

This scene entangles the exotic and the erotic, and deploys the rhetoric of seduction. The sensual imagery and the word “siren” associate Mariamu and this scene with the desire to cross or lure another across this socio-cultural border. I should point out that socio-cultural borders not only define and separate communities and groups, but can also be sites of connection and conversion. Moreover, Mariamu’s appearance recalls Corbin’s first sighting of her; on both occasions she wears the white frock and red pachedi. Pius Fernandes depicts Corbin in this scene as weary and almost feverish, thus maintaining the rhetoric of seduction; Corbin closes his eyes, holds a “cold sherbet glass to his forehead,” and “[w]hen he opened his eyes again it was as if he had been transported, was in the midst of a vision” (Vassanji 43). In this other-worldly, vision-like state, Mariamu’s seemingly inappropriate performance attracts Corbin’s attention: “[e]mbarrassed at what looked like exhibitionism for the sake of the white man, the mukhi turned towards Corbin, and the Englishman took his cue” (Vassanji 43). Mariamu’s exaggerated performance leads to the eventual exclusion of Corbin from the Shamsi festival because the mukhi intervenes, defends the socio-cultural border that separates the Shamsi community from others, and prevents Mariamu from crossing it.

In the scene above, the mukhi also prevents Mariamu from seducing Corbin. There is, however, some uncertainty in the novel as to whether or not Mariamu crosses this border and has a sexual relationship with Corbin; the novel contains one “bedroom scene” with these two characters, but there is nothing intensely sexual or erotic about it. Corbin just becomes “conscious of a cool sensation, hot aching eyeballs, the smell, the weight on the bed of another body. Mariamu was putting compresses on his forehead” (Vassanji 82). Furthermore, the erotic images that appeared in the scene in which Mariamu dances for Corbin are absent in this instance. Fever and illness displace dancing and seduction. In this context, however, illness becomes a metaphor for the pathology of colonialism, thus turning Corbin into a “yellow ghost of himself” (Vassanji 82). The word ‘ghost’ is significant as well since it links Mariamu and Corbin; both characters are ghost-like figures, apparitions, when they appear to cross these socio-cultural borders.

Mariamu is also identified as a character who crosses the socio-cultural border between public and private. The Shamsis expect to see a

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that Vassanji describes the garba dances and the conversion of the Shamsis in *The Gunny Sack*, where he mentions that the holy man emerges from the shadows and “[t]hen like a ghost he disappeared, as he had come” (7).



blood-stained bed sheet displayed from the newlyweds' home, which would provide evidence of the consummation of that relationship. Evidence of sexual activity, a private and intimate event, is publicized. But on the wedding night, Pipa discovers that his bride has already had sexual intercourse. A few days after the wedding, Pipa realizes that "he could have kept his shame a secret between these four walls; but instead he had announced it from the rooftops" (Vassanji 107). For some reason—and here the text is not explicit—Mariamu's stepfather, Rashid, either knows or suspects that there was an affair between Mariamu and Corbin: "[i]t was the *mzungu* who deflowered the girl" (Vassanji 106).<sup>10</sup> Pipa's outburst validates the rumor and makes the accusation more believable. Therefore, Mariamu ends up near the periphery of the Shamsi community again, and if Pipa chooses to reject her, then "[s]he would fend for herself, become somebody's woman, a prostitute" (Vassanji 106).

### Mariamu and the Pipa Affair

The Pipa affair, which plays a major role in the novel's plot, is another series of episodes that foreground the way in which socio-cultural borders determine diasporic identity in *The Book of Secrets*. The Pipa affair originates in Moshi where Pipa is paid to take a sack of letters with him on his trip from German Tanganyika to British East Africa and mail them. His job is important because members of the Shamsi community living outside the British Empire can take advantage of the British Empire's postal services and communicate with relatives in places like Voi, Mombasa and India: "[t]he postmaster showed annoyance, naturally, at this unusual quantity of mail" (Vassanji 47). An argument between Pipa, the postmaster, and Corbin's servant erupts and quickly escalates into a brawl, which Corbin resolves by jailing Pipa for the day.

Mariamu and the mukhi plead Pipa's case before Corbin. Both characters know "the place of an Assistant District Commissioner in the government hierarchy" (Vassanji 49). Both of them submit to Corbin, but the differences between the mukhi and Mariamu relate to the manner in which they approach Corbin; the mukhi is humble and respectful whereas Mariamu is brash. Corbin states, "[s]he was at my feet yet had had the nerve to burst in past my askari, for which she had not even apologized" (Vassanji 48). Vassanji draws our attention to Mariamu's entrance by repeating and highlighting the unusual aspects of her entrance. She is simultaneously assertive and submissive, but her assertiveness involves more than passing through a guarded door. On the matter concerning Corbin's treatment of Pipa, Mariamu, a female and marginal character, defies the gendered role within the Shamsi society and leads the

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<sup>10</sup> "Mzungu" is the Swahili word for white man. It is important to note that Rashid makes this accusation since there are ample hints within the novel suggesting that his relationship with Mariamu is inappropriate—perhaps even abusive. One could even argue that Mariamu's possession by the "shetani" is, in fact, a strong psychological reaction to something deeply traumatic.

community, and this form of leadership begins to alter her social status. As Gayatri Spivak says, “[i]f the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not subaltern any more” (158). Vassanji is not intent on keeping his marginal characters in marginal positions, and in this scene, Mariamu displaces the Shamsis’ leader.

The mukhi follows Mariamu, and Corbin mentions, “there was a gentle knock on the door. Now the whole community picks up courage” (Vassanji 49). I would like to mention two things about the mukhi’s arrival: first, his knock is “gentle,” an adjective that implies that the mukhi is meek and unassuming; secondly, he knocks on the door and waits for Corbin’s response. He approaches Corbin the way Corbin expects to be approached, and his expectations are fulfilled again when the mukhi steps “outside to pacify his community members” (Vassanji 49). In contrast, Mariamu’s behavior falls outside the bounds of what would be considered normal in both Shamsi and colonial British society.

In this scene, two Shamsi characters, Mariamu and the mukhi, plead for Pipa’s release from jail. However, a third Shamsi voice is also present. Corbin mentions that “[p]owerless though the individual Indian is beside a European, as a community they have a voice that is heard. In Nairobi, as the *Herald* regularly reports, they are making a lot of noise” (Vassanji 49). The British government hears the voice of the community, but the message comes across as noise. The “Pipa affair” perturbs the Shamsis (Vassanji 48), and the community mobilizes: “[l]ater I heard a commotion outside, approaching up the hill, then coming to a halt not far off” (Vassanji 48). Vassanji brings the voice of the Shamsi community into this scene through Mariamu’s reported speech and through the dialogue between Corbin and the mukhi; moreover, both Mariamu and the mukhi emerge from the crowd outside Corbin’s home. Thus, when Mariamu blurs the socio-cultural gender lines within the Shamsi community by behaving in a manner similar to the way the mukhi eventually acts, she becomes one of the more dominant voices in the community during the Pipa affair. Nevertheless, the potential dominance of Mariamu’s voice is diminished not only by the fact that very little dialogue appears in the text, but also by the presence of a language barrier. Corbin states, “[s]he was speaking in Swahili and I could not wholly understand her” (Vassanji 48). Nonetheless, her presence is strongly felt, and some communication occurs.

Vassanji does not render the voice of the community as homogenous; it is always through a multitude of voices that both the mukhi and Mariamu emerge. Corbin observes “[c]onsiderably less singing, much discussion” emanating from their mosque (Vassanji 48). “Noise,” “commotion,” “singing,” and “discussion” characterize the voice of the community; furthermore, the word “discussion” implies that there is still order. When the voice of the community encounters Corbin, it speaks through more than one character and in more than one language. Here, Mariamu speaks Swahili, an African language that both she and Corbin understand, although Corbin is not as fluent. The mukhi arrives later, and

clarifies the matter in English, the language of the colonial rulers. Thus, the voice of the community is not articulated through a single character or a single social register; it contains the voices of many characters and is polyglot. The letters that Pipa attempted to mail also prove this point: “[m]ost of them were in Gujarati or Swahili; a handful were in English and there was one in Greek” (Vassanji 47). The diverse languages and destinations of these letters indicate that the Shamsi community maintains connections not only to the homeland but also to other locations in the diaspora. Therefore, the “Pipa affair” has an impact on all Asians living in East Africa since it involves the rights of British subjects living in non-British territories to use the Royal Mail in order to maintain connections to relatives who lived “in Bombay and Porbandar and assorted villages in India” or settlements in East Africa like “Voi and Mombasa and Nairobi” (Vassanji 47). The jailing of Pipa thus reflects the subject’s right to maintain connections with other subjects in the diaspora.

#### Mariamamu and the Shetani

Etienne Balibar comments on the difficulty of imagining oneself as a border: “[b]ut isn’t this precisely what, all around us, many individuals, groups, and territories must try to imagine? It is precisely what they are living, what most intimately affects their ‘being’ insofar as it is neither this nor that” (217). Mariamamu, when she is under the influence of the shetani, is ‘being’ a border in the sense that she is neither Shamsi nor African. “When a shetani entered her head, she became a tigress, this quiet girl. She would attack her mother using all sorts of language. Ate like a demoness” (Vassanji 71). We should note that this form of familial dysfunction occurs on the periphery of the community. Nevertheless, the familial relationships occasionally break down within the Shamsi community and, when they do, the mukhi intervenes. Thus while under the influence of the shetani, Mariamamu’s already strange ways become stranger—and then unacceptable; she laughs and screams during the evening prayers, disrupts the services at the mosque, and violates the social mores regarding the sanctity of Shamsi religious practices.

As the scenes with Mariamamu and the shetani unfold, Shamsi beliefs and European values collide. Although the incident with Mariamamu and the shetani begins in Corbin’s absence, the mukhi believes that the beating administered to Mariamamu by the maalim was a necessary last-resort measure, whereas Corbin viewed it as illegal. One of the issues that arises from this disagreement is the extent to which British colonial authority overrides or interferes with the mukhi’s authority and position as secular and religious leader of the Shamsis in Kikono:

“Bwana Corbin,” began the mukhi.

“Yes, mukhi.”

“Sir ... our daughter ... taken away by the missionary lady ... most inappropriate.” He was referring, of course, to the “daughter of the community,” his niece.

“I did not see your daughter treated at all well, mukhi.”

“Bwana Corbin. You don’t understand ... excuse. Please. It was not she but a shetani, a spirit. The shetani had to be driven away ...”

“Do you believe in all that stuff ... spirits?”

“But of course, bwana. Everyone does.” And he murmured something.

“I beg your pardon, mukhi?”

And the mukhi quoted from the Moslem book in Arabic, then gave a translation: “We created man from clay, and the djinn We created from fire.” (Vassanji 70)

The conflict between Corbin and the mukhi is difficult to resolve, as the numerous tensions in the text suggest. When Christian missionaries take away and care for Mariamu, we can interpret this action as a condemnation of the way the Shamsis treat her. Alternatively, we can recognize the threat the Christian missionaries pose; they could convert Mariamu since the missionaries remove Mariamu from her community, cross a socio-cultural border that separates the Muslim Shamsis from the Christian Europeans, and sequester her outside the Shamsis’ jurisdiction. Corbin dismisses the belief in the shetani as nonsense or “stuff.” The mukhi, however, mentions that “everyone” believes in spirits. And this belief is not a matter of personal opinion; it is commonly held and community wide. Thus, “everyone” excludes Corbin: “[a]ccording to the coolies,” the mukhi said, “the spirits of the desert were offended by the railway of the mzungu, and came to attack them as lions” (Vassanji 50).

The shetani are also linked to the “twisted mbuyu tree” and connected to the African slaves who died under that tree during the famine when the caravans stopped “[a]nd the captives who were too weak were left to die —meat for the lions and hyenas” (Vassanji 71). The shetani stand for the African presence because they represent “those who had perished in the desert” (Vassanji 50). The word “mbuyu,” the Swahili word for the baobab tree, adds another African element to the Shamsis’ belief in the shetani as does the idea that “[t]he shetani reside in mbuyu trees” (Vassanji 50); however, the description of the mbuyu as “the hand of Satan” adds an Islamic element to this belief in the shetani (Vassanji 50). The mixture of African, Asian and Islamic beliefs point to a syncretistic aspect of the Shamsis’ diasporic experiences. The Shamsis’ concept of the shetani hybridizes beliefs derived from the Qur’an as well as from local, African legends. Therefore, religious beliefs form a socio-cultural border that separates those who incorporate new ideas into their belief systems from those who refuse to “believe in all that stuff” (Vassanji 71). For Corbin, “administration’s all right, but how the devil do you deal with another culture’s ghosts?” (Vassanji 72).

### Mariamu, Kikono and World War I

Vassanji establishes Mariamu as a character who stands apart from the other Shamsis, and, as I have mentioned earlier, he accomplishes this by describing her physical appearance and behavior, but he also shows that Mariamu inhabits a vacillating contact zone; through her, the novel depicts the socio-cultural borders of the Shamsi community. These borders,

however, are not marked clearly; they are hazy. Moreover, the settings in the novel also introduce and play with the concept of borders: “[w]e were at a boundary of sorts. The growth became dense ahead of us, and small trees littered the area” (Vassanji 58). The key phrase here is the “boundary of sorts,” which identifies an ecological buffer region that blends one ecosystem, the desert, to another, the greenbelt region fed by an underground river flowing from Mount Kilimanjaro (Vassanji 59). The phrase “boundary of sorts” also tells us that contact zones are present.

When the First World War begins, Kikono becomes a contact zone yet again. The war divides the Shamsi community: “[a]t the Shamsi Indian mosque they began to wonder, too, what victory their brethren on the other side—Jaffer Bhai, the mukhi of Moshi, and their congregation—were praying for” (Vassanji 150). The geo-political borders that separate German Tanganyika from British East Africa physically separate the East African Shamsi community. As the war progresses, the geo-political borders change and cross over the town. Kikono ends up in no man’s land. In this section of the novel, Vassanji shows us that even the geo-political borders move. Although the movement of armies, battle lines, and borders occur, the Kikono residents feel the effects:

A German troop could come to your door in the middle of the night demanding shelter and information. And the next day soldiers from the King’s African Rifles would come and beat you up for assisting the enemy. And so it was, right in the middle, between two warring sides, the Shamsis of Kikono sat trapped and waiting with prayers in their mouths. (Vassanji 151)

Prayers, moreover, were not immune from the propaganda war between the British and the Germans. The German side issues pamphlets in which the Grand Imam of Istanbul exhorts, “O, Muslims! [...] O, brothers! The government of the Kaiser is our true ally! Pray for his victory and rise against your Ingleez oppressors” (Vassanji 149). This pamphlet creates some doubt and uncertainty within Kikono’s Shamsi community by attempting to unite all Muslims against the British, but in order to succeed the propaganda needs to lessen the effect of the Shi’a-Sunni split, and the name “Grand Imam of Istanbul” attempts to do just that since the word “Istanbul” refers to the capital city of the predominantly Sunni Muslim Ottoman Empire, which formed an alliance with Germany in World War I, and the adjective “grand” elevates this Imam, a religious leader—either Sunni or Shi’a—above the other Imams, but the German propaganda is not entirely successful because the Shamsis had never heard of the Grand Imam of Istanbul before; they do not recognize his authority. Other propaganda leaflets “contained exhortations for the British side from the Aga Khan and the Sultan of Zanzibar” (Vassanji 156). Unlike the Germans, the British do not ignore or attempt to erase the Sunni-Shi’a schism; instead, they print directives from a Sunni-Arab ally, the Sultan of Zanzibar, and a Shi’a Imam, the Aga Khan.

The geo-political and socio-cultural borders eventually stabilize, but not before Mariamu is murdered:

She had been violated, but there was no point in broadcasting that. All these foreigners about—brutal and shameless—Africans from all over, Punjabis and Baluchis and Rajputs, it could have been any one of those depraved men. (Vassanji 171)

The “foreigners” are British colonial soldiers; some of them come from areas of India that are close to the regions from where the Shamsi emigrated. Thus, differences in geographical origin alone are not enough to constitute foreignness. There are other sources of difference that mark the colonial soldiers as foreigners, and the presence of the soldiers, the foreigners, disrupts the social and cultural balance in Kikono. In this new social environment, the Shamsis become secretive and withhold the news of Mariamu’s rape by an unknown assailant. And soon after the war ends, Kikono dissolves and the members of its Shamsi community disperse and move to other towns and centres in East Africa.

### Conclusion

The borders Vassanji evokes in *The Book of Secrets* are not permanently fixed, impermeable, and uncontested. The border regions or contact zones are in flux, so much so that at some moments in the novel—especially during the war—the Shamsis are fixed in place while the borders traverse them. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur remind us that “it has never been advisable to use diaspora as a means of celebrating border traversals” (17), and I have tried to avoid celebrating diasporic border traversals. Nonetheless, borders do not necessarily deserve automatic and unproblematic derision. Sometimes socio-cultural borders exist so that diasporic communities can differentiate themselves from others. Difference requires one to make distinctions, and often these distinctions are themselves the result of continual interactions with other identities. Diasporic experiences, as they are conceptualized by Mariamu in *The Book of Secrets*, rely on difference since socio-cultural borders are the points where identities are worked out. These experiences are not just, as Stuart Hall states, “narratives of displacement,” but also narratives of deferral (234). Diasporic identities do not necessarily depend upon remembered or reconstructed homelands, and the representation of the Shamsis in *The Book of Secrets* exemplifies this type of identity, one that is always already transformed in the diaspora.

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