The links between Asia and Africa and South America have always been present, but in our times they have been made invisible by the fact that Europe is still the central mediator of Afro-Asian-Latino discourse. We live under what Satya Mohanty in his interview in Frontline (April 2012) aptly calls “the long intellectual shadow of the Age of European Empire.”

In my case, I had always assumed that my intellectual and social formation was tied to England and Europe, with no meaningful connection to Asia and South America. There was a reason. I wrote in English. My literary heroes were English. Kenya being a British colony, I had learnt the geography and history of England as the central reference in my widening view of the world. Even our anticolonial resistance assumed Europe as the point of contest; it was we, Africa, against them, Europe. I graduated from Makerere College in Uganda in 1964, with a degree in English, then went to the University of Leeds, England, for further studies, in English. Leeds was a meeting point of students from the Commonwealth: India, Pakistan, Australia, and the Caribbean. We saw one another through our experience of England. Our relationship to England—in admiration, resentment or both—was what established a shared space.

After I wrote my memoir of childhood, Dreams in a Time of War (2006), I looked back and saw how much India had been an equally important thread in my life. I had not planned to bring out the Indian theme in my life, but there it was, staring at me right from the pages of my narrative. The thread starts from home, through school, college, and after.

I did not grow up in a Christian home, but we celebrated Christmas—everybody did, it was a time of carnival, with children, in their very best, trooping from house to house to indulge their fancy in terms of food. We were vegetarians throughout the year, though not out of choice, and to many, Christmas Day was the first time they would taste meat. For me, Christmas meant the occasion for
eating gi’tbero, a curried broth of potatoes, peas, beans, and occasionally a piece of lamb or chicken, but the centerpiece of the dishes was cabaci, sometimes called mborota. Even today, Christmas and feasts in Kenya mean plentiful cabaci, thambutha, and mandathi, our version of the Indian chapati, paratha, samosa. The spices, curry, hot pepper, all so very Indian, had become so central a part of Kenyan cuisine that I could have sworn that these dishes were truly indigenous.

It was not just Christmas: daily hospitality in every Kenyan home means being treated to a mug of tea, literally a brew of tea leaves, tangawizi, milk, and sugar made together, really a massala tea. Not to offer a passing guest or neighbor a cup of tea is the height of stinginess or poverty; and for the guest to decline the offer, the ultimate insult. So African it all seemed to me that when I saw Indians drinking tea or making curry, I thought it the result of African influence. Where-as the Indian impact on African food culture was pervasive, there was hardly any equivalence from the English presence; baked white bread is the only contribution that readily comes to mind.

This is not surprising. Imported Indian skilled labor built the railway line from the coast to the Great Lake, opening the interior for English settlement. Every railroad station, from Mombasa to Kisumu, initially depots for the building material, mushroomed into towns mainly because of the Indian traders who provided much-needed services to the workers initially but also, in time, to the community around. If European settlers opened the land for large-scale farming for export, Indians opened the towns and cities for retail and wholesale commerce.

Limuru, where I come from, had a thriving Indian shopping center built on land carved from that of my maternal grandfather’s clan. The funeral pyres to burn the bodies of the Indian dead were held in a small forest that was also under my maternal grandfather’s care. Cremation is central to Hindu culture: it asks Agni, the fire god, to release the spirit from the earthly body to be re-embodied in heaven into a different form of being. The departed soul traveled from pretaloka to pitraloka unless there were impurities holding it back. My mother did not practice Hinduism, but to her dying day she believed and swore that on some nights she would see disembodied Indian spirits, like lit candles in the dark, wandering in the forest around the cremation place. She talked about it as a matter of material fact, and she would become visibly upset when we doubted her.

It was not all harmony all the time. The Indian community kept to itself; there was hardly any social interaction between us, except across the counters at the shopping center. Fights between African and Indian kids broke out, initiated by either side. The Indian dukawalla, an employer of Africans for domestic work and around the shops, was, more often than not, likely to hurl racially charged insults at his workers. Some of the insults entered African languages. One of the most insulting words in Gikuyu was njangiri. A njangiri of a man meant one who was useless, rootless, like a stray dog. Njangiri came to Gikuyu from Jangaal, the Sanskrit/Hindi word for “wild”: it would have been what the Indian employer was likely to call his domestic help. In colonial times, in my area at least, I do not recall the tensions ever exploding into intercommunal violence.

The postcolonial scene presents a different picture. Time and again Indians and Indian-owned stores have been the targets of violence, especially in times of crisis, mostly victims of looting. I am not sure if it’s the fact of their Indianness or of their being a most visible part of the affluent middle class. In such a case the line between racial and class resentment is thin. Different in that sense is the case of Idi Amin’s Uganda, where hundreds of Asians were expelled from a country that had been their home for almost a century. In both the colonial and postcolonial eras, social segregation, forced in the case of the colonial era, or a consequence of habit and history, has exacerbated tensions.

The colonial school system segregated Asian, European, and African from each other, and it was not until I attended Makerere College that I had social interaction with Indians. Makerere was an affiliate of the University of London in Kampala, Uganda, where, until the advent of Idi Amin, racial relations were benign. Before its college status, Makerere used to be a place of postsecondary schooling for African students from British East Africa, but as independence approached, the college opened its doors to a sizeable Indian student presence. That is when we started learning about each other’s different ways of life on a more personal basis. We shared dorms, classes, and the struggles for student leadership in college politics and sports. Leadership emerged from the multi-

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The lead role of an African woman in my drama *The Black Hermit*, the first major play ever in English by an East African black native, was an Indian. No makeup, just a headscarf and a kanga shawl on her long dress, but Suzie Wooman played the African mother to perfection, her act generating a standing ovation lasting minutes. I dedicated my first novel, *Weep Not Child*, to my Indian classmate, Jasbir Kalsi, in homage to our friendly but fierce intellectual rivalry in our English studies. Ghuls Nensi led a multiethnic team that made costumes for the play while Bahadur Tejani led the team that raised money for the production.

Such interactions were not simply in the personal realm. Commerce and the arts, crafts, medical, and legal professions in Kenya have the marks of Indian genius all over them. Politics, too, and it should never be forgotten that Mahatma Gandhi started and honed his political and organizing skills in South Africa, where he spent twenty-one years of his life (1893-1914). South African scholar Masilela Ntongela places Gandhi squarely among the founding intellectuals of the New African Movement. The honorific Mahatma, the great soul, was first applied to him in South Africa. By the time he left for India, he had already developed his principles of Satyagraha and Ahimsa. India’s anticolonial struggles eventually led to independence in 1947, which had a big impact on anticolonial struggles in Africa. India achieved could be realized in Africa! Gandhi stayed abreast of African politics, Kenya in particular, and wrote a letter of protest when the British imprisoned one of Kenya’s early nationalists, Harry Thuku, in the 1920s. Gandhi created the tradition of South African Asians at the front line of struggle in South Africa. Ahmed Kathrada was one of the ten defendants in the famous Rivonia trial that would lead him to Robben Island, where he spent eighteen years alongside Mandela and others. What Gandhi started, Mandela completed. When I met Mandela in Johannesburg soon after his release and his election as president of the ANC party, I came away from the hour-long one-on-one conversation struck by the charisma of his simplicity, reminiscent of what people said about Gandhi.

The birth of the trade union movement in Kenya was largely the work of Gamal Pinto and Makhan Singh. Imprisoned by the Kenyan colonial authorities repeatedly, Makhan Singh never gave up the task of bringing Indian and African workers together. He was the first prominent political leader to stand in a court of law and tell the British colonial state that Africans were ready to govern themselves, a heresy that earned him imprisonment and internal exile. Kapenguria is usually associated with the trial and imprisonment of Jomo Kenyatta, but Makhan Singh preceded him. There have been some Indian political martyrs, the first being the Indian workers executed for treason in the very early days of colonial occupation. Gamal Pinto, a hero of the anticolonial resistance, would be a prominent victim of the postcolonial negative turn in Kenyan politics. Though under a fictional name, Gamal Pinto has been immortalized in Peter Nazareth’s novel *In a Brown Mantle*, one of the best literary articulations of the political drama of the transformation of African politics from the colonial to the neocolonial.
The recent explosion of Chinese interest in African might obscure the fact that there has always been a small but significant migrant Chinese presence, South Africa mostly, but also in Zimbabwe. Fay Chung, whose grandparents migrated to Rhodesia in the 1920s, became an active participant in the anticolonial struggle, at one time running for her life into exile in Tanzania. A key player in the founding of Zimbabwe, she founded Zimfep, which invited Kamirithù theater to Zimbabwe—a visit scuttled by the Moi regime by simply banning the theater group and forcing one of its leaders, the late Ngũgĩ wa Miriĩ, to flee to Zimbabwe—and under Zimfep launched the Zimbambwe Community Theater Movement, ensuring the continuity and expansion of the Kamirithù spirit. (It’s the subject of a book by L. Dale Byam, Community in Motion: Theater for Development in Africa.)

Mao Tze Tung never visited Africa, but his thought has been part of the intellectual debate in the postcolonial era. His class analysis of Chinese society provided a more relevant model for analyzing African postcolonial social realities than the European Marxist model, and Kwame Nkrumah’s book Class Struggle in Africa has Mao’s marks all over it. The notion of the comprador bourgeoisie, dependent and serving foreign capital and hence contrastable from the national bourgeoisie, with its primary reliance on national capital, has become an analytic model in political theory and development studies.

The intellectual history of the continent would be the poorer without the journal Transition, now based at Harvard, but founded by Rajat Neogy way back in 1962. Neogy, a brilliant and creative editor, was Uganda born and educated: he believed in the multicultural and multifaceted character of ideas, and he wanted to provide a space where different ideas could meet, clash, and be mutually illuminated. Transition became the intellectual forum of the New East Africa, and indeed Africa, as the first publisher of some of the leading intellectuals on the continent, including Wole Soyinka, Ali Mazrui, and Peter Nazareth. Transition published my short story “The Return” a turning point in my literary life. The story, which captured what would later become so central a part of my aesthetic explorations in my novels, principally A Grain of Wheat, was the sole basis of my inclusion in the 1962 conference featuring African writers of English expression.

Peter Nazareth and Bahadur Tejani, early contributors to Transition, would later set the tradition of Afro-Indian writing with their novels, a tradition taken to new heights by Moyez G. Vassanji (see WLT, Sept. 2005, 84). More than even black African writers, these three have been among those who have explored extensively and intensively the often problematic African-Indian relations. My own work, Wizard of the Crow (2006), in which I tried to bring Eastern philosophies into imaginative discourse with African realities, was following in the footsteps already made by these writers on the sands of the African cultural scene.

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It may be argued that in the specific cases of East and South Africa, where there has always been a sizeable Asian immigrant presence, Afro-Asian dialogue was inevitable. But, in general, Africa and Asia have met through the political entities like the Bandung conference; the nonalignment movement; the Afro-Asian Peoples solidarity organization; and, in intellectual practice, during the long years of the Afro-Asian writers movement, which staged conferences in various capitals of Asia and Africa.

I have always felt the need for Africa, Asia, and South America to learn from one another. This south-to-south intellectual and literary exchange was at the center of the Nairobi literary debate in the early 1960s, and is the centerpiece of my recent theoretical explorations in *Globalec-tics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. The debate brought about a literature syllabus that centered on the study of Indian Asian, Caribbean, African American, and South American writers alongside those of the European tradition. The result was not to the liking of the neocolonial regime in Kenya, who accused me and my colleagues of replacing Shakespeare with Marxists revolutionaries from Asia, the Caribbean, Afro-America, and Latin America, among them being Lu Xun, Kim Chi Ha, V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, C. L. R. James, Alejo Carpentier, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. Shakespeare was of course safe, but we had committed the crime of placing him among other writers and changing the name of the department from English to Literature, which we thought the more appropriate designation of the study of literature without borders.

As the editor of the Gikũyũ language journal *Mutiri*, I have published the Gikũyũ translations of some of the poetry of Ariel Dorfman and Otto René Castillo. Professor Gitahi, who did the translations directly from Spanish into Gikũyũ, did his doctoral work on Latin American literature. Gitahi was a product of the reorganized literature department of Nairobi University. His translation has facilitated direct Spanish-Gikũyũ language conversation.

I would like to publish numerous translations from the languages of Asia and South America, and challenge African, South American, and Asian translators to rise to the occasion. More importantly, I would like to see similar efforts at enabling conversations between African, Asian, and South American languages. This also calls for a new category of literary scholars who have studied a combination of languages. This also calls for a new category of literary scholars who have studied a combination of languages from Asia, Africa, and South America.

It is time to make the invisible visible in order to create a more interesting—and ultimately more creative and meaningful—free flow of ideas in the world. Satya Mohanty is quite right when he points out that “one of the many advantages of the present moment is that the long intellectual shadow of the Age of European Empire seems to be receding a bit, and we have remarkable opportunities to work across cultures to learn from one another.”

Mohanty’s call for cultural interaction and interchange across borders—beyond the Eurocentric campus and our current notions of comparative literature—echoes in a forceful way and fresh manner the vision assumed and contained in the call for the abolition of the English Department made in Nairobi in 1969, the first steps in what would later become postcolonial theories and studies. Mohanty’s call for cross-regional comparative literary studies is a necessary and timely intervention on the path toward a genuine world literature.

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