NARRATING NATIONAL IDENTITY: FICTION, CITIZENSHIP AND THE ASIAN EXPERIENCE IN EAST AFRICA

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The paper will center on the crucial postcolonial crisis of identity in the nation-states of traditional East Africa i.e. Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, and will particularly explore the portrayal of national / citizen identity in selected East African Asian fiction. The main aim of the paper will be fourfold: first, to highlight the various ways through which indigenous Africans construct the Asians as partial, provisional, second-race citizens in the fiction under study; second, to locate the constructions in the political and economic history of East Africa, in relation to the experiences of other migrant communities elsewhere in the world; third, to deconstruct the constructions in order to show their illogicality; and fourth, to suggest key lessons that East African governments could learn from the Asian writers' portrayal of citizenship so that the rejuvenation of the East African community may herald concerted efforts towards the creation of a multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural society, where all citizens will be considered full citizens irrespective of their race and ethnicity. The paper will, giving examples from literary and non-literate works, investigate the partial and provisional nature of East African Asians' citizenship status, and will locate this 'partiality' and 'provisionality' in the political and economic history of East Africa, particularly the colonial history of British (and to some extent - especially before the troubles caused by her defeat in the World Wars - German) domination of East Africa - a domination that used the divide-and-rule policy to set Africans up in arms against the Asians through the Institution of a three-tier racial hierarchy where the whites, at the top, used Asians as economic and political middlemen between themselves and the Africans, whose duty was to hew wood, fetch water and nanny white and Asian babies as submissively as possible. This hierarchy, the paper will argue, led to the Africans' construction of Asians as co-colonizers who were harmful to the social, economic and political interests of postcolonial East Africa, and therefore a people unworthy of full East African citizenship. It is this view, and others like it (for example, the labeling of Asians as get-rich-quick-immigrants-in-transit exploiters, racially arrogant and socially exclusive fellows, etc.) that precipitated the 1972 expulsion of Asians from Uganda, which in many respects was a symptom of the failure to build a postcolonial multiracial and multicultural East African society. The paper will also interrogate the literary medium as a creative and critical production of knowledge, and will endeavor to evaluate the extent to which the selected literary writers may be relied on in the analysis of the identity-centered debate of the Asian experience in East Africa.