

Social Dynamics

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Edited by Meg Samuelson and Shaun Viljoen

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Editorial

Shaun Viljoen and Meg Samuelson

The Sea

A single entity, but no blood.

A single caress, death or a rose.

The sea comes in and puts lives together
and attacks alone and spreads itself and sings
in nights and days and men and living creatures.

Its essence – fire and cold; movement, movement.

– Pablo Neruda (1975 [1967]: 15)

This special issue of *Social Dynamics* emerges out of a conference hosted by the English Department of Stellenbosch University in July 2006, at which earlier versions of a number of these articles were presented. The articles in the issue explore, in various ways, the leitmotif suggested by the conference theme 'Forging the Local and the Global', and examine discursive practices associated with the unequal, uneven confluences and disjunctures between disparate spaces and across temporalities. This wide-ranging theme has solicited analyses from a range of disciplinary perspectives, and from points of intersection between them – from literary and cultural studies (produced in departments of African Literature, English and Portuguese), to visual arts, history and anthropology.

As she did at the conference as one of the keynote speakers, so here Isabel Hofmeyr sets the stage – for her the black Atlantic as a model for grappling with and accounting for cultural transnationalism is supplemented with and enriched by considerations of the Indian Ocean World. She shows how the maps of southern African literary and cultural studies can be extended and complicated once we relocate them within the three intersecting networks provided by the continent and the two oceans that flank it. Hofmeyr's scholarship, and the positions offered in the other papers, pointedly challenge and extend conceptions of the relations between oceans and continents in this journal of 'continental' African Studies. The starkness of dichotomies associated with the black Atlantic and relations to Africa and the East are troubled; and, as suggested by our cover image, the reformulated interconnectedness is found to be far more shift, more elusive and less prone to any mere single grasp. This is the unstable littoral zone at which continents merge into oceans, dispersing like the grains of sand that scatter so evocatively in this image.

Fernando Ribeiro's work on the Portuguese empire unveils processes of creolisation that have been overlooked by nation-centred historiographies, and which he finds are

the aspirations of a nationalism that sought to benefit the majority (black) African population. At the same time, the ideals of equality for all derived from the fact that, at the time of independence, what was known as Kenya – itself a creation of colonialists and empire builders – was a conglomeration of races and ethnic groups. There was hardly one group that could exclusively claim ‘native’ status or autochthony in Kenya. The new nation-state derived its identity from an accumulation of different identities, both local and foreign. Indeed Kenya, specifically its coastal strip, had functioned within the Indian Ocean World, and has thus been a point of contact for peoples from Asia, South Asia and the Middle East for centuries before the arrival of the British colonisers. Arabs, Chinese and Indians, among others, had traded (and settled) on the coast of the Indian Ocean at least since the fifteenth century (cf., *inter alia*, Balfour, 1938; Pearson, 2005); M.N. Pearson points out that ‘there is evidence of trade between India and Africa from at least the beginning of the Common Era’ (2005: 232). Arabs established political, religious and cultural structures and practices in the region that prevail to this day. When Europeans sought to extend foreign influence into the interior of the country they had to rely on the knowledge and labour of other groups, mainly Arabs, Indians and Africans. Indians were moreover brought to Kenya as indentured labourers in large numbers, as was the case elsewhere in the British colonies (see Patel, 2006: 23-27).

The first wave of Indians to move away from the coast and into the interior of Kenya came to work on the Kenya-Uganda Railway that was to run from the port of Mombasa to Port Florence in western Kenya, and then onward to Port Elizabeth in eastern Uganda. The newly arrived labourers were expected to work for a specified period and then go back to India, which were the terms for indentured labour in most parts of the British Empire. But as the colony expanded and both economic and commercial opportunities arose, the demand for more semi-skilled and skilled labour increased. Artisans, clerks and professionals thus made up the second wave of Indian immigrants in colonial Kenya. Whereas the first wave was comprised mainly of men alone, the second wave consisted sometimes of whole families, or parts thereof. The subject of this essay, Makhan Singh, came to Kenya with his parents in the early twentieth century (his father was returning to Kenya to work as a printer).

Makhan Singh’s story is a tale of life in India under British rule; of life in colonial Kenya; of life in independent India; of postcolonial life in Kenya; of life in the Indian Ocean World; and of the influence that the ocean has had and continues to have over different regions, peoples and the world as a whole. Makhan’s⁶ life mirrors anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles all over the world. His is a narrative of trade unionism in Kenya from its very inception, as his story paints a canvas of transnational struggles for human dignity and human rights amongst the colonised; most importantly of all, his story foregrounds the contribution that Indians in the diaspora or from within patterns of ‘circular migration’ (Bose, 2006: 73) have made to other peoples, cultures, societies and lands. Patel’s biography is thus about a life that was partly built on utopianism and aspiration; the biography holds a mirror up to internationalist idealism, of selflessness and sacrifice, but also of betrayal and abandonment.

Unquiet is an accomplishment in the use of the archive to construct a biography. Patel relies on thousands of archival records in Kenya and India from the precolonial to contemporary times as she traces the life of Makhan back to the Indian subcontinent, a journey that re-enacts in reverse the early migration of Indians to Kenya. In the course of the journey in search of Makhan’s roots, Patel re-introduces the history of empire-making and its aftermath – in this case the complexes and fractures at the independence of India that produced East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Pakistan, where Makhan’s village of birth is now located. *Unquiet* is part of an on-going process by Kenyans of South Asian descent in the twenty-first century to articulate their ‘localness’ as Kenyans as well as their connection to other worlds. It is not surprising, then, that Patel is also an editor of a local magazine addressed to Kenyans of South Asian origin: *Awaaz: Voices from the South Asian Diaspora*. *Awaaz* seeks also to connect Kenyans of South Asian origin to others who now live in the diaspora in places such as ‘Canada, the USA and England’; while ‘meant for general audience’ it specifically aims to foster ‘serious debates within the Kenyan South Asian community’ (Awaaz, 2007).

Patel’s biography of Makhan Singh contributes to this larger project by offering an alternative viewpoint on the identity of postcolonial Kenya, with particular attention to the contribution that (im)migrants have made in the forging of Kenya’s national identity today. *Unquiet* also seeks to outline and

defend the important role that early trade unionism played in the struggle for democracy in Kenya. In doing so, it acknowledges the multiracial character of the country and exhorts Kenyans to recognise a shared history with other peoples and cultures. Finally, this biography is also a testimony to the author's own search for a tangible identity in a nation that is fraught with racial and ethnic tensions, as Patel's own words in the Preface suggest (2006: xi-xvi), even though such a search may appear futile in a global context where one's existence is marked by competing identities. As Amartya Sen has recently argued, in a language similar to that used by Arjun Appadurai (2006) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006), the complexity and constituency (or even constitution) of identity should remind us that we are subject to multiple and competing affiliations (2006: 3-5). Yet such manifold identities generally sit uncomfortably with many 'nativist' notions of nationalism, such as those that came to characterise postcolonial African countries such as Kenya. The reluctance of the Kenyan government to allow dual citizenship points to such uneasiness with those who seek to hold multiple affiliations, whereas the expulsion of Indians from Uganda in 1972 demonstrates most strikingly the discomfort of postcolonial African governments with those who sought to claim more than one citizenship and identity.

In the face of such 'silencing' gestures, it is in the interest of modern Kenya as a nation-state for such 'histories' or 'stories' of individuals like Makhan Singh to be re-counted, both as narratives and as cumulative contributions to the making of modern day Kenya. This article is a provisional exploration of the contemporary currents in the politics of national identity in Kenya today. It acknowledges that there is a substantive body of literature – literary, historical, sociological, anthropological and economic – on the subject of Indians/Asians in Kenya/East Africa (cf., *inter alia*, Salvadori, 1996; Herzig 2006), but focuses its brief attention on Patel's biography of Makhan Singh and does not, by any means, aim to offer an exhaustive analysis of the Indian question in contemporary Kenyan writing. Consequently, it has truncated what is a complex subject and history (of Indians in Kenya) in order to retain attention on *Unquiet*.

Postcolonial Identity Politics in Kenya

Contemporary Kenya continues to struggle with questions surrounding its national identity. The multiplicity of ethnicities, races and cultures that make

up Kenya has posed particularly difficult questions for its political leaders and citizens, especially when it comes to the subject of what makes one a Kenyan.⁷ Nationalism is a contested ideal globally. It is made even more difficult when the 'nation' in question is one forged out of colonially-imposed social, political, economic and cultural structures. Politically (and perhaps economically) there are strings that hold the nation-state together. Culturally – due to the close relations between constructions of race, ethnicity and culture – the subject of nationalism becomes muddled and confusing. For instance, how does one forge a unitary identity out of often competing and conflicting identities? The 'Indian question' in Kenya is important because it forces us to confront the complex spectre of race, ethnicity and nation(al)ity in the postcolony.

History unequivocally records that Indians (or people of Asian origin) participated in Kenya's anti-colonial struggles (Salvadori, 1996; Patel 2001). Their contribution to the liberation struggle in Kenya was informed by the suffering they too endured at the hands of the colonial regime, even though they were racially and socially classified above the African 'natives' under colonial rule. However, postcolonial Kenya, fraught with ethnic, racial and class tensions, has tended to downplay the contribution made by Indians to Kenyan African's struggles to free themselves from British rule. Indians have been depicted as exploitative racists alienated from other Kenyans.⁸ Neither are such accusations and resentments specific to Kenya. In Tanzania, Issa Shivji (1976) records similar feelings in the post-independence period. In Uganda, thousands of Ugandan Indians were expelled by Idi Amin in 1972, ostensibly because they controlled the economy. To date, apprehension of Indians in Uganda continues, as exemplified in the flare up of violence directed at people of Asian origin in the early months of 2007.⁹ This violence was ostensibly a protest against the government giving a part of Ugandan national forest to an investor of Indian origin. Underlying this anger is an unresolved antipathy towards Indians in the country.¹⁰

The 'Africanisation' (or indigenisation) programme and its variants in the three East African countries – Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – in the early years after independence was apparently meant to limit the control that Indians had over the economy.¹¹ This points us to the basis for the negative sentiments and accusations levelled against Kenyans of Indian origin. Kenyan Indians are probably the most economically successful and privileged

social category in the country. Apart from being astute businessmen and industrialists, they were also a significant group in the immediate post-independence professional class, composed of doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers and so on. However, some of them have been implicated in scandals that involved theft of public funds, of course in complicity with (African) political leaders and bureaucrats, especially in the 1990s. Politicians have manipulated the assumed public disdain of Indians to pursue their own interests whilst at the same time extorting material support from the community. Therefore, the Indian is an enigmatic and contested subject in Kenya today. Patel's biography of Makhan Singh is an attempt to re-cast this subject (both as a topic of discussion and as a community) into the public debate on nationhood in twenty-first century Kenya. It is a revisionist text that revisits the treatment of Indians in Kenyan national(ist) history. Through its reconstruction of Makhan Singh's life and times, it poses urgent questions about the manipulation of national history to exclude (or include some) Indians and downplay their contributions to freedom struggles and to the independent nation's politics, economy and culture.¹²

Makhan Singh, in Brief

According to Patel, Makhan Singh was a trade unionist, a poet, an essayist, a printer, a political activist, a communist, an ideologue, a hero of Kenya's liberation struggle, as well as a committed internationalist, among other things. Patel traces his ancestry to a 'village called Gharjakh, in the district of Gujranwalla in the Punjab province of India' (2006: 16). The son of a village artisan, Makhan was born on 27 December 1913, and first arrived in Kenya, together with his parents, in May 1927 at the age of 14 years. He was admitted to a school in Nairobi, where he later passed his London Matriculation examination in 1930, before joining his father's printing business, the Khalsa Printing Press, when unable to continue with his education (Patel, 2006: 34). Patel writes that, even as a young man, Makhan was a student of 'left-leaning' ideology and communism.

When working at his father's press in Nairobi, Makhan was already making friends across the racial divide with African workers. These are the incipient steps of what turned out later to be a career of trade unionism and political activism. Makhan's interests in politics, trade unionism and communism developed in a context that was rife with left-leaning political

movements and activists. Patel notes that several Sikh Ghadrtes (members of the Ghadr ['Revolutionary'] Party)¹³ passed through Nairobi and had considerable influence on Makhan (*ibid*: 6-11). He became involved in trade unionism as the honorary secretary of the Indian Trade Union in 1935 and was instrumental in the transformation of the organisation into the non-racial Labour Trade Union of Kenya, which later changed its name to Labour Trade Union of East Africa in order to include workers from Uganda and Tanganyika. Makhan left for India in 1939 and was arrested in May 1940 for involvement in political activism (*ibid*: 105). As a member of the Communist Party of India, he 'spent his time in prison (in India) translating Marx's *Das Kapital* into Punjabi using the Gurumukhi script' (*ibid*: 108). He returned to Kenya in 1947, despite a 'quit order', banning him from Kenya, issued against him by the colonial government, which he successfully appealed (*ibid*: 117-33).

After his return, Makhan became a key figure in the evolution of the workers' movement in Kenya, while his political engagements spilt beyond its borders into the East African region and, further, to India. He was instrumental in the inception and organisation of non-racial trade unionism in the Kenyan colony, recorded in his book, *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952*, at a time when other Indians were reluctant to support Africans. Due to his political activities, he endured countless attempts by the colonial state to suppress him, including the issue of a 'quit order' against him, and his restriction to the then Northern Frontier District of Lokitaung in August 1950 (*ibid*: 276). He was to remain in detention together with several other African political leaders, including the founding President of the Republic of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, until after the end of the State of Emergency in 1960.

Makhan was released from prison on 18 October 1961, but the Uhuru he fought for, unfortunately, did not bear him good fruits. Although he joined the Kenyan African National Union, the party that formed the new government after independence, it seems that his communist affiliations, at a time when Kenyatta's government was becoming increasingly hostile to individuals with socialist/communist backgrounds, alienated him from the government. Makhan receded from the public sphere; although he continued to be involved in the trade union movement in Kenya – publishing his *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952* in 1969, for instance.

He would die in 1973 at the age of 60 (*ibid*: 478), a 'forgotten man', like so many other heroes of the national liberation struggle.

This article will turn now to explore three elements of the biography that are important in the framing of Makhan as a person and his identity as both a national figure and an internationalist: the global trade union community; the circulation of texts; and Indian Ocean connectivity in anti-imperial struggles. These three strands are not mutually exclusive but rather intertwined in Makhan's story; they reinforce and complement each other.

Transnational Trade Union Connections

Unquiet is as much about local trade unionism in Kenya as it is about the connections between local and global workers' organisations. The formation of the Indian Trade Union, which catered for the interests of workers in both Mombasa and Nairobi as early as 1914, was a clear recognition of the bargaining power of Indian artisans and tradesmen in the emerging colonial economy. Indian workers had realised from as early as 1900 that the success of the Kenya-Uganda Railway depended on their skills and labour and that they could therefore negotiate for better terms of service from their colonial employers. But for as long as the colonial government kept the workers separated by race, which implied that neither Indians nor Africans could muster sufficient numbers to pose a significant challenge to the railway administration, Indian unionists were less likely to succeed in forcing the authorities to meet some of their demands. However, the formation of the non-racial Labour Trade Union (LTU) (subsequently, the Labour Trade Union of East Africa) in 1935 united substantial numbers of workers of all races, a situation that gave the LTU significant powers of negotiation.

It was in such a position that Makhan found himself as the honorary secretary of the union. The LTU engaged in campaigns to reduce the working hours for African and Indian workers (they demanded eight working hours per day); it sought government compensation in the case of injury at the workplace; it fought for permanent employment for Railway and Public Works Department employees, who were then employed on temporary terms; and it wanted workers to be paid on a monthly rather than hourly basis (Patel, 2006: 61). These demands, which sought to better the working conditions of Indian and African workers in Kenya, were deemed by the LTU as a 'struggle between capitalists and workers' as suggested in a 'handbill

dated 31st October, 1936' that was most likely authored by Makhan and is cited by his biographer:

Our worker comrades! Come forward! March ahead! If you do not march ahead today, then remember that you will be crushed under the heels of capitalists tomorrow. Workers should have a united stand and should stand up strongly against the capitalists so that they should not ever have the courage to attempt to exploit workers again, nor to take away workers' rights from them.

Note: The workers of M/s Karsan Ladha have gone on strike for higher wages. It has been reported that the strike situation is becoming serious.

This has now become a question of life or death for workers. (*Ibid*: 62)

These words not only introduce the language of class differentiation into Kenya at the time, marking employers as capitalists and employees as workers, but also signal the appearance of Communist discourse in labour unions in Kenya. Makhan, and some of his fellow unionists, were instrumental in disseminating propaganda against the colonial government and both European and Indian employers. Although Communist activities were closely monitored by state agents, the trade unionists, especially Makhan, subscribed to Communist ideology, and the activities of organised labour at the time clearly suggest that these organisations sought to identify with other workers' struggles against capitalism elsewhere in the world. Another notice of a public meeting on 1 October 1937 proclaimed, 'World's Coming Political Struggle and Your Duty. Come and Hear at the Public Meeting' (Patel, 2006: 75).

On the evidence of this notice, and many others cited in Makhan's biography, the local (Kenyan) labour movement sought to project itself into transnational, regional and global struggles by workers against capitalist exploitation. The link between local trade unionism and other similar organisations in places such as South Africa, India, England and America was established and maintained through a network of circulating literary material. These shared texts concretised relationships across regions and established transnational class solidarity, even though in many instances, due to travel restrictions imposed by colonial rulers, these relationships remained purely imagined. Makhan clearly believed in the universality of the struggles for worker equality across races and nations. Consequently, he

sought support and inspiration from other international labour activists and organisations. It is a mark of his convictions as a trade unionist that, despite being a member of a wave of immigration that displayed incipient capitalist tendencies (the Sikhs who arrived as traders and artisans), he explicitly identified himself as a Communist agitator for workers' rights.

Travelling Texts and Worker Mobilisation in the Colonies

One characteristic of Makhan Singh that Patel articulates emphatically is his affinity to literary material. Makhan was clearly a man who loved reading and writing; Patel writes:

Makhan Singh borrowed books mainly from the Desai Memorial Library and the British Council. From the books which were of special interest to him, he wrote lengthy and detailed summaries and this he did since his arrival in Kenya in 1927 as a 14 year old student. (2006: 550).

This characteristic was not incidental given that his father was a printer and that he learned and earned from the trade himself. According to Patel, moreover, Makhan was an avid poet, whose earliest poem, written in Punjabi in the Gurumukhi script, is dated 27 November 1928. Patel notes that the poem is in 'praise of Guru Nanak [the founder of the religion practiced by the Sikhs] and illustrates both Makhan Singh's awareness of his religious foundations and also his concern for justice, truth and suffering' (*ibid*: 31). Much of his subsequent poetry, at least that cited in the biography, is dedicated to socio-economic and political struggles, as evidenced in the following:

To liberate India is not so difficult
If we all get together
And struggle against the common enemy
We must not have any personal needs
We must all be ready to sacrifice all
Wealth, belongings, your body
Be ready to face the gallows
Like Baghat Singh and Sarabha
To save the life of India
We have to face the
Capitalists, exploiters, blood-suckers
Only then can we say
We have saved the motherland. (qtd. in Patel, 2006: 44)

Moving between India – to which this poem is addressed – and Kenya, Makhan drew global linkages with the local struggles for worker rights and later political freedom in both Kenya and India. The written text made it possible for these connections to be sustained over time, although the travel and movement of individuals (including Makhan himself) was also instrumental in the circulation of propaganda, ideology and ideas about imperialist exploitation and opposition to it.

Immediately after he left school in Kenya, Makhan 'began a serious study of political literature of all types. He was influenced by the workers' and peasants' movements (both communist and socialist) and trade union struggles going on throughout the world, as well as by freedom movements' (*ibid*: 36). His opposition to imperialism and colonialism drove him to seek knowledge of organisations and activities elsewhere that were also opposed to British rule. He subscribed to leftist newsletters, periodicals and magazines that represented workers' voices. For instance, Patel notes that he 'subscribed to the weekly *International Press Correspondence*. He also received the foreign newsletters of the All India Congress Socialist Party which dealt mainly with the international situation, socialist unity and trade union organisation' (*ibid*: 74); in 1939 he 'wrote to the secretary of a Labour organisation in Johannesburg thanking him for his Christmas and New Year greetings and for two copies of the *Cape Federation Journal*' (*ibid*). In Nairobi, the activities of the various trade unions were organised through notices, bills and announcements in various newspapers. This use of print media was deemed to cut across the racial divides and also to reach a larger audience beyond Nairobi. For Makhan, the use of the printed word came naturally from his work at Khalsa Press.

One point that needs emphasis here is the circulation of texts and the dynamics of this circulation in the production of publics. Michael Warner's formulation of 'publics and counterpublics', in a book of that title, proposes that 'the notion of a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity' (2002: 11-12). Texts, then, have the capacity to reproduce sociality. Individuals, separated by distance, language, race, culture or time, may identify with and share commonalities with texts from elsewhere. Such texts may be borrowed and applied in a local context to provide inspiration and even formulae for social struggles. This is one

manifestation of Makhan's continued search for global connectivity, in this case through either contributions of his personal writings or subscriptions to publications from elsewhere in the world. He clearly imagined the struggles by Kenyan workers as a part of a larger, international struggle by people of all races and places.

The power of these circulating texts to influence local communities and generate debate could be discerned in the state's decision to ban several publications in the Colony in 1949; thus, according to Patel:

The government reacted [to the threat of an emerging and well organised trade unionism] by banning, through official gazette notice 202, dated 8th March, 1949, a number of periodicals from abroad. This was done under section 53 of the Penal Code by His Excellency the Governor in Council. The banned publications included the *Labour Monthly* of London, *New Africa* of New York, *Guardian* of Cape Town and *People's Age* and *Blitz* of Bombay. *Blitz* was reported as having 'communist leanings... [and] hurls streams of scurrilous abuse impartially at the British, South African and Indian Governments' (*ibid*: 183).

These travelling texts, among many others, were seen as potent by both the trade unionists and the colonial government. Each group interpreted them differently, each informed by whatever ideologies it subscribed to, such that the same text could be at one time a source of inspiration (for the trade unionists) and an instrument of agitation (in the eyes of the colonial government).

The Indian Ocean and Multiple Identities in the Colonies

Distinguished by its antiquity, the Indian Ocean continues today to have as much influence on the cultural character of the world as the Atlantic Ocean (cf. Hofmeyr, 2007). Both oceans contributed considerably to the movements of peoples and goods – especially cultural ones – across most of the world. Today, Indian diasporas and circular migrations and their influence on global culture and economy are almost unparalleled. Historically, India was a significant player in African affairs. Indian (and Arab) traders, ferrying back and forth on the monsoon winds, contributed to the growth of powerful communities on the East African Coast. The arrival of the British and the establishment of the Kenyan colony in the late nineteenth century brought a different category of Indian to East Africa: the indentured labourer. The

status of these labourers in the colony was determined by work contracts that were signed before leaving India. As the colony expanded and the need for more labour arose, many Indian labourers decided to stay and start new lives in Kenya. Yet their local lives were still subject to and often mediated by their relationship with their homeland – India.

As indicated, Makhan arrived in Kenya with his parents in the early years of the twentieth century. Patel notes that his father, Sudh Singh, was barely involved in political activities whilst in India and even after arriving in Kenya. However, when members of the Indian artisans formed the Railway Artisans Union and started to agitate for 'better wages and working conditions' (Patel, 2006: 21), Sudh Singh, who was its secretary, was dismissed along with other members. He opted to return to India. In 1924 he went back to Kenya, deciding 'to settle in Nairobi' (*ibid*: 22). The migration of the ramghariahs, or Sikh artisans, into Kenya in the nineteenth century was as a result of both harsh colonial conditions in India as well as part of a global movement engendered by the expansion of the British Empire. These were the forces of globalisation, in an earlier manifestation.

For almost all his life, according to the biographer, Makhan retained his links with his homeland of India, even after the place of his birth became part of Pakistan in 1947. His writings betray a lifelong affiliation and sympathy to particular aspects of Indian political culture and life – he retained his linkages with the Indian Communist Party, for instance – whilst remaining loyal to his adopted country, Kenya. But this was not peculiar: on the one hand, many Kenyans with Indian ancestry still retain strong connections to the land of their ancestors, sending their children to India for studies and seeking spouses for their children in India, as Makhan did; on the other hand, it expresses a belief in, and the practice of, communist internationalism. As an internationalist who believed in the primacy of a shared humanity, Makhan was aware of what Appiah has characterised as 'the connection not *through* identity but *despite* difference' (2006: 135). In associating with Africans, and at times dissenting from the shared goals of his fellow Indians in colonial Kenya, Makhan was an example of a 'believer without border' (*ibid*: 137), to borrow Appiah's formulation.

The years that Makhan spent in India (1939-1947) seem to have crystallised his political as well as trade union beliefs. During his stay in Bombay, Makhan was involved in workers' movements and political

activism which led to his arrest and detention in May 1940. He 'remained detained and restricted without trial in various parts of India for five years' (Patel, 2006: 106). It's important to note that his tribulations in India were not isolated from his activism in Kenya. Colonial oppression seemed to respect no bounds; and Makhan himself appeared not to fear the colonial government wherever he went. It seems that, for Makhan, activism was in pursuit of a higher ideal: to free humanity from oppression. It therefore did not matter where the struggles in pursuit of this ideal were waged – on one side of the Indian Ocean Rim or the other.



What Patel attempts in *Unquiet: the Life and Times of Makhan Singh* is a recuperation of a silenced history. This is an attempt at the restoration of a part of Kenyan historiography that has been pushed to the margins of the narrative (or narratives) of nation-formation. Patel's biography charts a course that other authors – of non-fiction and fiction – have already travelled along. Kenyan Indians have produced a significant archive of literary writing that draws on their experiences as exiles and migrants either when still in Kenya or after leaving for other lands (cf., *inter alia*, Ojwang, 2004; Siundu, 2005). These archives provide a rich tapestry of accumulated historical, social, cultural, economic and religious experiences unique to South Asian diasporas and circulations, which, at the same time, celebrate the centrality of Kenya/East Africa/Africa in the lives of these migrants.

It is without doubt that individuals of Indian origin contributed to the struggle for liberation from colonialism in East Africa. Postcolonial Kenya has failed to acknowledge not only these contributions, but most of its struggle-era heroes and heroines.¹⁴ Several leaders of the Mau Mau movement and important African trade unionists hardly feature as key historical figures in Kenya. What *Unquiet* does is to unsettle this history; it destabilises the foundations on which modern Kenya's historiography is constructed by raising questions about the place of both race and trade unionist activism in the country. At the same time, Patel compels us to encounter the undeniable connections between Africa and India, and therefore to ponder the implications of the meeting between these two worlds, while raising the spectre of communist internationalism.

The repression of the 'Indian Question' in Kenya is a refusal to acknowledge the relationship that the country has and shares with South Asia because to do so would be to fracture the national(istic) discourses that privilege 'Africanness' in relation to other identities. Makhan suffered a number of tribulations at the hands of the independent government; for instance, he was refused a licence to 'lecture on Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's biography and the history of Kenya's national movement' (Patel, 2006: 460-61) and he had to endure mistreatment at the Voice of Kenya, the national radio station, where he worked after independence (*ibid*: 462-66). These instances, among others, point to a concerted effort by the new government of independent Kenya to silence those who held differing opinions and, more so, those who embodied the historical entanglements of the Indian Ocean World and their challenges to imagined national homogeneity. Yet it is obvious that the formation and constitution of modern Kenya were bound to the dynamics of the Indian Ocean World. From the arrival of Chinese, Indian and Portuguese traders on the East African coast to the establishment of Arab ruling dynasties along this coast, to the arrival of imperial agents who initiated the colonial project in the hinterlands of what is now known as Kenya, the country's history and stories of nationalism have roots that stretch to the Indian subcontinent and the Oriental World and which have immensely enriched its mix of identities. Such a melting pot of tongues, races, hues, histories, cultures, religions and roots, to rephrase Patel's title, cannot be kept quiet.

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Notes

- 1 I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and others who made suggestions on this article.

- 2 I will use the term 'Indians' to refer generally to people of South Asian origin as this is the term commonly used in Kenya.
- 3 See, *inter alia*, 'The Exodus Revisited: Harvest of a Colonial Fruit' by Ramnik Shah (2007) in *Awaaz* for a recent discussion of the 'Indian question' in Kenya today.
- 4 Zarina Patel has published other texts such as the children's reader *Jevanjee: Rebel of the Empire* (2002) and *Challenge to Colonialism: the Struggle of Alibhai Mulla Jevanjee for Equal Rights in Kenya* (2001).
- 5 See Arjun Appadurai's *The Fear of Small Numbers: an Essay on the Geography of Anger* (2006) for a recent discussion of how anxiety and fear of minorities can be the basis not only for exclusion but even for genocide.
- 6 I use the first name 'Makhan' to refer to the subject of the biography, Makhan Singh, because the surname, Singh (meaning 'lion'), is an appellation that is meant to be used by all Sikh males, as decreed by Guru Gobind Singh (Patel, 2006: 4). Because there are other Singhs in the biography, the use of the first name is also meant to avoid confusion.
- 7 See Atieno Odhiambo's (2003) playful take on who can claim 'Kenyaness' and the manner in which specific discourses relating to the Mau Mau, one's ethnic affiliation, where one schooled and so on are deployed to specify one's claims to be Kenyan. Such a language of 'nationalism' excludes non-African Kenyans from its frame of national identity and politics.
- 8 These are stereotypical categories that are occasionally found in the mass media, and even in literature. A text such as Shiva Naipaul's *North of South* depicts the Indians in East Africa contemptuously and cynically and even suggests that any resentment by Africans they may suffer is 'invited' due to their exclusiveness.
- 9 See the *Times of India* (2007), which notes that the attack led to the death of at 'least two Indians'.
- 10 A further example from southern Africa would be the kind of discourses about perceived 'aliens' that Mbongeni Ngema recently resurrected in South Africa in his song 'Amandiya'.
- 11 William Ochieng' argues that the 'Africanization of the Economy' through legislation in the early 1960s in Kenya was meant to 'break the "foreigners"' dominance of the Kenyan economy and transfer it to Kenyans' (1995: 85). Such a piece of legislation, curiously, did not acknowledge that, at the time of independence, several thousands of Indians in Kenya were permanent residents or even citizens.

- 12 One should note that postcolonial Kenyan history has also been reluctant to acknowledge the contribution of other racial minorities, European and Arab, to the struggle for freedom and to processes of nation formation.
- 13 Ghadr ('Revolutionary') was a party made up of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims and was formed in San Francisco in 1913. Its aim was to 'overthrow British rule in India through armed revolution' (Patel, 2006: 6)
- 14 It took postcolonial Kenya over forty years to build a statue in honour of Dedan Kimathi, probably the most celebrated of the African liberation struggle heroes. The statue was unveiled in February 2007. Many of the non-African and other African heroes of the anti-colonial struggles remain forgotten.

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Proclamations and Silences: 'Race', Self-Fashioning and Sexuality in the Trans-Atlantic Correspondence between Langston Hughes and Richard Rive¹

Shaun Viljoen

Abstract

The article draws on research for a larger project – a (literary) biography of writer, essayist and educationist Richard Rive (1930-1989). In this piece, the correspondence between Rive and Langston Hughes, as well as creative, critical and autobiographical works by Rive, provide the sources for an examination of ways in which the Cape-based writer forged a sense of self in the face of acute racial oppression, and how he left unspoken or deeply encoded his sense of his own homosexuality. Gilroy's notion of the creation of meaning through movement across the Atlantic proves useful to a point, but my argument is that Gilroy's 'double consciousness' is more applicable to black diaspora in the north than it is to a figure like Rive, who proves to be far more multivalent and contradictory in his self-fashioning as a non-racist, a South African and both a black and cosmopolitan writer.

Cape Town writer Richard Rive (1930-1989) and American author Langston Hughes (1902-1967) conducted an extended correspondence across the Atlantic between 1954 and 1967, the year of Hughes's death. One of Rive's very first short stories of the early 1950s called 'The Return' was, in 1953, entered into a *Drum* short story competition judged by, amongst others, Hughes.² Hughes was impressed with the stories of the budding writers who submitted their fiction to *Drum*, and his exposure to these South African works gave birth to his idea for the publication of an anthology of African short stories. He began writing to various African writers about his idea. He also wrote to the young Rive very soon thereafter, in a letter dated 28 May 1954:

Biography of a Trade Unionist and the Resurrection of the 'Indian Question' in Twenty-First Century Kenya¹

Tom Odhiambo

Abstract

The place of Indians/Asians in Kenya's national history remains on the margins. The postcolonial Kenyan nation-state has been reluctant to acknowledge the role that Kenyans of Indian/Asian origin played and continue to play in the evolution of modern Kenya. Makhan Singh is one such Kenyan of Indian origin whose place in the Kenyan historiography has remained uncelebrated. This article offers a preliminary meta-critique of Zarina Patel's Unquiet: the Life and Times of Makhan Singh. It notes that this biography is a significant intervention in the treatment of the 'Indian question' in contemporary Kenya.

The biography – although deigning to 'tell' what is not publicly known about an individual – always tends to raise more questions than provide answers. Biographies of individuals, especially if they have been public figures, are even more at risk of producing multiple 'narratives' and 'interpretations,' given that the public presumes some knowledge of such an individual. Finally, biographies of public figures tend to be carriers of the histories, moments and events within their lifetime as well as those of their communities/societies. It is in this sense that Zarina Patel's biography of Makhan Singh, *Unquiet: the Life and Times of Makhan Singh* (2006), can be read: it is Makhan Singh's story as well as that of his community.

The subject of Indians in Kenya has remained vexed and has been dubbed the 'Indian question' in both popular and academic discourse. The 'Indian question' refers to the complexity that arises out of this group's national, ethnic and socio-economic origins and affiliations. For instance, a majority of Indians (or Asians)² in the immediate post-independence Kenya held Kenyan as well as British citizenship (by virtue of their Indian origin), in

addition to their Indian ancestry. This state of multiple affiliations generated resentment among Africans, who deemed the Indians unpatriotic, which, in turn, led to several migrating to England and other parts of the world in the late 1960s. Indians, it seems, did not fit neatly into the political and cultural discourses framing the new nation.³

Patel's choice of a title for the biography of Makhan Singh, *Unquiet: the Life and Times of Makhan Singh*,⁴ is most fitting because it foregrounds the life of a national hero who would otherwise remain on the periphery of Kenya's national history. Among the questions this essays asks are: Why is it significant to author a biography of Makhan Singh at this time in Kenya's history? What value does this biography add to Kenyan society in the postcolonial era?

Nationalist discourses are generally disinclined to celebrate the achievements of minorities or the contributions of such groups to the nation. Narratives of nationalism tend to suppress 'other' histories and the narratives of the 'few' in the interests of the assumedly larger nation. In many parts of the world, so-called minorities or people whose numbers are 'small(er)' tend to become victims of the nationalist 'majority'; whenever they are deemed to threaten the interests of this 'majority', they may suffer oppression, repression or even attempts at extermination, as the genocides of the past century have demonstrated.⁵ Postcolonial nations provide some of the best examples of the difficulties of integrating minorities within the (new) nation, probably due to the haphazard manner in which different ethnic groups were lumped together to form colonies. In the postcolony, race and ethnicity were, and continue to be, the two important determinants of a group's status as a minority or a majority (cf. Muigai, 2004: 200–17). In a country such as Kenya, with over 52 ethnic groups and different racial categories, the individual's or group's identity is generally marked by affiliation to either race or ethnicity. People of South Asian origin in Kenya have always been categorised as an undifferentiated 'race' (whereas the Africans are divided into various ethnicities).

Yet, when Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963, the republic was declared non-racial. Africans, Europeans, Asians, Arabs and others of 'mixed races' were all declared 'Kenyans' and imbued with equal rights by the constitution. None could be discriminated against on the basis of race, creed or religion. Such utopian and egalitarian ideals were, however, in contest with