

Reading Cultural Representations of the
Double Diaspora

Maya Parmar

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*Dedicated to my dearest parents, Mr Vijay Parmar
and Mrs Bindubala Parmar,
and all those who journeyed before them*

PREFACE

‘I feel ke [that] this [Britain] is my home, this is where I belong [...] even though I was born in Kenya.’

(Vijay Parmar, 23 September 2016)

Returning to Kenya for the first time after 50 years, having settled in Britain, Vijay Parmar, a member of the ‘double diaspora’, articulates, in the code-switching linguistics of English and Gujarati, his reflections around the themes of home-making and belonging. He clearly expresses an attachment to Britain, positioning it as home, though also signposted in that articulation is an interplay with his birthplace of Kenya. Both Vijay Parmar and his wife Bindubala Parmar were born in Nairobi, Kenya, whilst their familial and cultural heritage stems back to Gujarat, India. As teenagers they migrated to Britain: Bindubala Parmar with her respective family in 1970; Vijay Parmar on his own, to join his uncle already located in London in 1964. Their families had established lives in Kenya, over a long period. For example, on Bindubala’s grandmother’s paternal side, genealogical research suggests that the lineage in East Africa spans back to 1865. Testifying to an entrepreneurial streak, later generations on each side arrived to establish small shopkeeper businesses, servicing fledgling communities within the tripartite colonial hierarchy. These settled lives in the East African territories of not only Kenya, but Uganda and Tanzania, were often interspersed with return excursions to India, for family reunions, marriages and births.

On coming to Britain, Vijay Parmar found work with an elderly Jewish Holocaust survivor from Vienna (Austria), as an apprentice to his watch and

clock repair business, in Willesden Green (London). When Mr Grunberg retired, he left the business to Parmar, having lost his own son to Holocaust atrocities. Subsequently, Parmar's lifetime entrepreneurship—his bread and butter—was conceived via the business 'Grunberg and Parmar', and so too was his belonging to Britain cemented, in and above that tendered to India or Africa. 'Grunberg and Parmar' was an effective enterprise in its day and, like this overall account, is one example of the experiences amongst what I call the 'double diaspora', that community that has migrated from India to East Africa, now in Britain.

That diaspora has deep roots spanning the world. This book is shaped around those global and historical migratory flows, in conjunction with the continuities and discontinuities of the stories of a people once on the margins in some ways, yet skilled and paradoxically renowned for their success in resettlement and integration. The diaspora subsequently is rather 'un-postcolonial'. Through their entrepreneurial success they are no longer on the economic margins of British society, given their relative affluence, as well as their social integration. Often they have established a successful, comfortable place in Britain and within the diaspora, despite underpinning experiences of pain, loss and trauma. Subsequently, this is a diaspora that has not been immediately visible within the scholarly criticisms of postcolonialism and cultural literary studies.

Despite their prominence and success in Britain, whether in business or in social integration, corresponding relevant scholarly investigations, which explore the postcolonial cultural life of the diaspora, are largely absent from contemporary debate. This absence has manifested itself for a number of reasons. On the one hand, there is a distinct gap in creative writing produced by the double diaspora, or about the diaspora. The community favours other pursuits, and there has been a notable collective lack of interest in literary culture. On the other, an intellectual climate that has primarily converged on an unfragmented 'South Asian' diaspora has led to the obscurity in critical discourse of the particular twofold nature of migration intrinsic to the double diasporic condition.

In this monograph, I address this lacuna in postcolonial, diaspora and cultural studies by examining this double diaspora, of the contemporary period, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In doing so, the study locates itself in relation to wider debates concerning the South Asian diaspora, yet too splinters the monolithic category of the South Asian migrant

community. Thinking conceptually about a unified, opaque British South Asian diaspora is now dated: instead in diaspora studies it is apposite to refocus our purview to examine the mosaic composition of this broad migrant group. By splintering the opaque category of ‘South Asian’, we reveal a nuanced picture of life in the British diaspora, whether that takes account of, by way of example, religious, class, caste, regional or linguistic difference. I specifically address an absence in discourse on the regional Gujarati diaspora, migrated to Britain, via East Africa, by scrutinising the gaps and joints in established scholarship.

Being a daughter of double migrants, of the entrepreneurial and resilient Vijay and Bindubala Parmar whose narratives I outline here, I have a deep curiosity around these fissures. I grew up in a Gujarati British household where, typically and for example, we used a *kisu* to slice the family-favourite savoury snack of *mogo*. Whilst *kisu* is the Swahili for knife and *mogo* means cassava, a root vegetable integrated into the South Asian diasporic diet in East Africa, both testify implicitly to an East African heritage. Manifested in the everyday cultural practices of British Gujarati lives—as exemplified here through language and culinary rituals—are the markers of a migrant past distinct from India, rooted in East Africa. They trace a history embedded in not only Gujaratiness, but also in Kenya, and a present lived experience of life in Britain. These traces of cultural memory are entangled with the diasporic body. This book oscillates around many of these refrains and reflections, wishing to carve out a space in scholarship for the migrant realities that are so often overlooked. Growing up, and being educated, in Britain, I could not access these stories; they were not to be found. It is rather unnerving to look into the mirror of history, of literature, and find no reflection.

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