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Gaurav Desai. *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. 352 pp. $30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-16454-2.

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Commerce with the Universe is a literary critic's attempt to create an awareness of the ***longue durée*** of historical contact and exchange between diverse cultures of the African continent and the Indian subcontinent. Does a chance historical discovery of Indian silk in the wrappings of ancient Egyptian mummies, and precolonial accounts of Arab geographers and historians detailing a complex maritime world of commodities and ideas in the Indian Ocean world, affect or alter our present understanding of this relationship? Do colonial and postcolonial narratives (fictional or otherwise) remain sensitive to the intercultural and transcultural implications of this long-standing historical contact, one that existed for more than a thousand years prior to colonialism's celebration of Bartolomeu Dias's rounding of the Cape of Good Hope in 1488? Out of the many questions and issues raised by this book, a question that perhaps keeps the reader preoccupied long after finishing the book is one that Desai puts in the book's introduction: "What happens to our understanding of Africa--its history, its sense of identity, its engagement with modernity, and the possibilities of its future--if we read its long history as an encounter not only with the West, but also with the East?" (p. 6). Desai offers to provide an understanding of this encounter by offering critical readings of a few fictional engagements, memoirs, and autobiographical narratives of South Asians writing about or traveling in East Africa in the twentieth century.

In a way, this book is a continuation of Desai's earlier work in ***Subject to Colonialism*** (2001), where he visits the African colonial library as a space of epistemological colonization, complementing the colonization of diverse human societies and physical geographies in the African continent. While he follows the Congolese philosopher and writer V. Y. Mudimbe in approaching what Mudimbe calls colonialism's "invention of Africa" (an epistemological ordering of "Africa" as reductive economic, political, and cultural geographical zone, understood solely and fundamentally as an European construct),[1] Desai is less amenable to the idea of colonialism in Africa as solely external, and asks researchers of colonialism and postcolonial conditions to consider the colonial library as a space open for contestation, and consider as central (and not marginal) to the library the works and texts of "those African subjects who took it on themselves to engage with the discourses of the colonizers and to produce their own inventions of Africa".[2] ***Commerce with the Universe*** hopes to problematize this understanding further by introducing the intersubjective agency of texts written about Africa by another group of players and creators: South-East Asians

(identified interchangeably as "Indians" and "Asians" throughout this book).

In the first chapter ("Ocean and Narration"), Desai notes the general absence of Indian characters in "the canon of colonial and postcolonial black African literature," or their nominal appearances as stock characters fulfilling the role of the exploitative trader, shopkeeper, or settler aligned to the white colonizer in the racially segregated landscapes of postcolonial fiction; for him, these representations signal a greater need for a critical self-questioning of African stereotypes concerning Indian-origin settlers in Africa. He calls for a nuanced transoceanic understanding of the diverse histories and emotions of intercultural exchange existing in the Indian Ocean world before and after the advent of European colonialism and the old imperial world order, and beyond the narrow topicality of racially and ethnically charged political nationalisms of the present. Critical of Afrocentricity and appropriations of oriental and colonial worldviews while approaching "Africa's engagement with the East," Desai invokes the skepticism of Richard Rorty and Kwame Anthony Appiah in arguing that "political conundrums, and the challenges of forging human solidarities, may be better met by our common human capacity to imaginatively engage with narratives than with any recourse to theory or philosophy" (p. 18).

The second chapter ("Old World Orders") is a slightly reworked version of Desai's 2004 essay "Old World Orders: Amitav Ghosh and the Writing of Nostalgia," published in ***Representations***. Here Desai offers a critical reading of Amitav Ghosh's ethnographic fiction ***In an Antique Land*** (1992), eulogized by cultural critics like Cliffford Geertz for its recreation of the twelfth-century Indian Ocean world as a "multicultural bazaar," and at the same time, providing a contemporary narrative of Ghosh's field trips as an anthropologist to two villages in the Nile delta in Egypt during 1980-81, and again in 1988 and 1990. Subtitled a "history in the guise of a traveler's tale," ***In an Antique Land*** is now part of the standard postcolonial canon, taught across literature departments in India and Africa, as well as in the global North as a summative exemplar of how yet another postcolonial subject successfully "grapples with the problem of representing the Other" in a pluralistic universe, rejecting the "anonymity of History" through open-ended imaginative recreations.[3] As a writer of Indian origins, Desai is less susceptible to the politically correct brouhaha in Northern cultural studies and postcolonial circles surrounding Ghosh's work, though. He pulls no punches in laying bare that, in Ghosh's attempts to imaginatively recreate a twelfth-century Indian Ocean world untouched by colonialism, and to dialogically integrate that in a Westernized anthropologist's field observations in contemporary Egypt, ***In an Antique Land*** participates in the "production of history in a nostalgic mode," which is quite prone to slippages of a "belated" Orientalism in terms of how it reads antiquity (p. 28). Ghosh's evocation of a happy world of interfaith utopia existing in the Indian Ocean world populated by Jewish and Muslim traders of Cairo and their slaves, and his fictional recreation of the life history of an Indian slave, Bomma (for whom slavery exists only as a "spiritual metaphor" understood in terms of religious symbolism), Desai argues, offers a sanitized view of precolonial slavery in the Indian Ocean world in the attempt to distinguish it from the horrors of later European transatlantic slavery (p. 50). By revisiting Ghosh's narrative on the Indian slave in the archival reading offered by the Cairo Geniza documents, Desai indulges in a parallel reading of ***A Mediterranean Society*** by the German Jewish historian Shelomo Dov Goitein, and contends that despite Ghosh's critique of Western historicism, his fictionalized adoption of a historical perspective shares with Goitein "an uncanny disposition in favor of free-market economics and the market-oriented state," and an "overwhelming acceptance of the proposition that multiculturalism would follow if only the market were left to work on its own" (p. 45).

If *In an Antique Land* bemoans the modern loss of a religiously plural world, Desai also notes, Ghosh's "I" narrator maintains a dignified silence in his anthropological narrative when the Egyptian villagers repeatedly equate his "Indian-ness" with his "Hindu-ness," and does not care to mention the variegated presence of large Muslim populations in India, or engage with the serious misrecognition at work that identifies "Indian" ethnicity solely in terms of an imagined nationhood and religious ideology centered around stupid cow-worship, also de-Africanizing Islam in the process: "By allowing the villagers to persist in their reading of India as essentially Hindu, and of themselves as essentially the descendants of Arab Muslims with no ties to Pharaonic Egypt, Ghosh loses the opportunity to discuss with them issues such as multireligious national communities and their own hybridized histories" (p. 28). Desai attaches some value, though, to Ghosh's admission of his inability to share memories of his childhood trauma with the Egyptian villagers, when he had witnessed religious riots between Hindus and Muslims at Dhaka during the Partition of British India, not expecting them to understand "an Indian's terror of symbols" (p. 33); what Desai fails to identify is that Ghosh's "I" narrator in ***In an Antique Land*** too is a fictional construct: the author Amitava Ghosh (born in July 1956) could not have witnessed firsthand the Partition Riots (1946-48).

The third chapter ("Post-Manichaean Aesthetics") contests Frantz Fanon's reading of the colonial world as a starkly divided Manichaean world order where the "absolute evil of the native" exists in constant opposition to the "absolute evil of the settler," and in particular, engages in a long academic debate with Abdul JanMohamed's ***Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*** (1983) to point out that the work maintains a "curious silence on the non-black, nonwhite subjects of Africa" (p. 68). Offering a review of the recent writings on "Asian-African" literature as "genealogies in the making," Desai provides a brief historical overview of the rich legacy of "Asian-African" theatrical and literary production in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century East Africa that has gone unnoticed, and outlines the need for a self-conscious attempt to revisit and revitalize multiple legacies of Indian-origin settlers in Africa.

The fourth chapter ("Through Indian Eyes") offers a reading of two early twentieth-century travel narratives written by two Gujarati men of commerce, Ebrahimji Adamji and Sorabji Darookhanawala, business-prospecting in the "East African interior" between 1902 and 1905. These works are not Desai's unique archival finds; he follows the English-language translations of these Gujarati texts offered in a 1997 volume edited by Cynthia Salvadori and Judy Aldrick, published by the Friends of Fort Jesus Museum in Mombasa as ***Two Indian Travellers, East Africa, 1902-1905***. Here Desai notes the ease with which these travelers navigate the multilingual and multiethnic colonial landscape, while offering differing visions of their "cosmopolitan" being. The fifth chapter ("Commerce as Romance") continues with this identification of "cosmopolitanism" by offering a reading of three memoirs written by Gujarati merchant capitalists operating in East Africa during various phases of the long twentieth century: Nanji Kalidas Mehta's ***Dream Half-Expressed*** (1955), Madatally Manji's ***Memoirs of a Biscuit Baron*** (1995), and Manubhai Madhvani's ***Tide of Fortune*** (2008). What enabled these Indian businessmen to gain enormous wealth, power, and clout in some of the world's poorest countries forever scarred by colonialism? (As Eduardo Galeano reminds us in another colonial context: "In this world of ours, a world of powerful centers and subjugated outposts, there is no wealth that must not be held in some suspicion.")[4] The element of suspicion, however, is altogether missing.

The sixth chapter ("Lighting a Candle on Mount Kilimanjaro") reads the memoirs of Sophia Mustafa, Al Noor Kassum, and Jayantilal K. Chande, three Tanzanians of Indian descent, who

"played a central part in the project of nation-building" in Julius Nyerere's Tanzania (p. 152). While Desai enthusiastically highlights their fondness for Nyerere's doctrine of nonracialism, and stresses on their movement from philanthropic charity to "more participatory forms of civic engagement" (p. 168), their reactions to Nyerere's socialism-inspired ***ujamaa*** collectivization programs in the field of agriculture is strangely missing; as is missing the narrative of the persistent presence of Indian-origin business families in Tanzania through the long era of colonialism, their affiliation and integration into the Wabenzi state bureaucracy fetishizing about Benz cars, and their uninterrupted economic growth after the "structural adjustment" programs of the IMF and World Bank, while Tanzania remains one of the most foreign-aid dependent and poorest countries in the world. With the exception of Sophia Mustafa, an Indian-origin writer who served for some time as a member of Parliament in the 1950s and later migrated to Canada, the other two come from wealthy Indian business families and held considerable clout in postcolonial Tanzanian politics: Al Noor Kassum was to become the East African Community's minister of finance and administration, and held senior positions at the UNESCO and the UN; Jayantilal Chande was the chairman of Tanzania Railways Corporation and of Barclays Bank Tanzania Limited, also a member of the board of directors of private and public companies and government corporations such as the East African Railways Corporation, East African Harbours Corporation, Tanzania Harbours Authority, Air Tanzania Corporation, and Tanzania Tourist Corporation—details Desai chooses to overlook in his need to stress the philanthropic uniqueness of Indian-origin business. Chapter 7 switches back to literary criticism: it offers a reading of M. G. Vassanji's ***The Gunny Sack*** (1989) as an "anti anti-Asian novel," one that critiques ethnic stereotypes about the Asian in Africa, and disrupts the "Manichaean inheritance of anticolonial thought" in favor of a return to an "Gandhian model of engaging with empire on intimate terms" (p. 204). How does that engagement begin? Desai provides no convincing answer.

In brief, Desai's insistence on keeping the "cosmopolitanism" of the Indian Ocean world at the center of conversations on African colonialism is reminiscent of Paul Gilroy's identification of the "Black Atlantic" as a "counterculture of modernity" as opposed to culturalist understandings of "race" and nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches, and Gilroy's insistence that cultural historians "take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective."[5] However, ***Commerce with the Universe*** does not carry the marks of Gilroy's reconstructive intellectual labor, which offers a devastating critique of the innocent post-Enlightenment European modernity, "readily purged of any traces of the people without history whose degraded lives might raise awkward questions about the limits of bourgeois humanism."[6]

Desai is more comfortable with the usual politically correct bibliographical nods to various contemporary political and literary theorists, than with engaging with the complexities of the problem he poses in the book's introduction. As a result, two serious issues are inadequately addressed. One concerns the search for an cognitive anchor point by the imagined postcolonial subject, in the need to distance herself from one of the lasting legacies of colonialism—the inclusive boundaries of provincialized European thought, categories, and concepts, the genealogies of which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, "go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe."[7] Can there be movement, as Desai insists, conceptualized outside these boundaries other than with "recourse to theory or philosophy" (p. 18)? Can a postcolonial subject completely do away with the intellectual training in definitional zones and categories of comprehension re-

ceived from and through Western thought, fields of knowledge limited and at the same time constantly recreated by the subject's participation in the postcolonial ***habitus?*** In his introduction, Desai dismisses as "postcolonial anguish" the observations of writers like Chakrabarty and Mudimbe who insist on the impossibility of such action without recourse to the functional universals at use, and indeed, reject the possibility of postcolonial ***gnosis*** without recourse to an understanding of the epistemological limits set by the colonial encounter. Yet, Desai uses the terms "Asians" and "Indians" interchangeably, and defines the term "Afrasian" as "the entire nexus of individuals who have historically crossed (and continue to cross) the Afrasian sea," including twelfth-century Tunisian Jews as well as twentieth-century Indian men of business in Africa (p. 223n26). Does this reading, or does it not, imagine a conceptual zone that is external to but exists ***after*** colonialism, and at the same time operates within a unitary, historicist, and inherited time frame? And how does a close reading of ten different, eclectically selected texts, not all of which are ergodic, and all written in the twentieth century by Indian-origin writers, offer a historical understanding of the "Afrasian imagination" ?

The second issue follows from the first: it concerns the uneasy relationship shared by what Desai calls the "Afrasian imagination" with colonialism in Africa. Ebrahimji Adamji, the Indian-origin traveler Desai identifies in the fourth chapter as having written one of the first "Afrasian" narratives of travel in East Africa, was a member of a prominent Mombasa-based Muslim Bohra merchant family, which, Desai tells us, made its fortunes by selling supplies to British troops during their colonial war against the Nandi people in Kenya at the end of the nineteenth century, and then began investing in the ivory trade and transportation of goods (p. 88). Given Desai's stated fondness for the poststructuralist method of attaching more importance to moments of silence inherent in a text, one would have expected a reconstitutive reading of Ebrahimji's 1902 narrative within a greater canvas of East African cultural history documenting the movement of Indian merchants, traders, and workers along the Mombasa-Kampala railway lines, while the British encroached upon the ancestral lands of the Nandi (1895-1906). Yet, the massacres of Nandi women, children, and civilians, the decapitation of the Nandi leader Koitalel Arap Samoei by a British army officer under the pretext of a peace talk, the widespread famines that followed in the Nandi lands as a result of the British scorched-earth policy, the sequestering of the Nandi population in reserves, had no impact on Ebrahimji's "ethical" sense of being; at least, none Desai finds important to mention. The issue of Indian complicity in British colonialism gets cursorily mentioned in a footnote, where Desai asks the reader to remain sensitive to a "nuanced sense of history" while reading Ebrahimji's life story (p. 243n6). It is quite understandable that Indian traders living in East Africa during the early twentieth century shared to a considerable extent the white man's prejudices against ethnic Africans as nonbeings. But to argue from a reading of their imaginary self-representations on paper that Indian traders like Ebrahimji were "cosmopolitan subjects in their own right," i.e. displaying "cultural tolerance, a healthy respect for the identities of others, an ability to easily and almost unself-consciously move between one or more cultural registers," and to read their multilingual capabilities "as continuous with the cosmopolitanisms long associated with the Indian Ocean," is to indulge in serious historical inattention of the first order concerning the issue of colonialism (pp. 109-110).

The general tone of ***Commerce with the Universe*** is in sharp contradistinction to the tone of the chapter where Desai castigates Amitav Ghosh for his bourgeois liberalism. Why the choice of the book's title? The answer is somewhat outlined at the end of the fifth chapter. There, after recounting the philanthropism inherent to three Gujarati merchant capitalists in East Africa through a

reading of their biographies, Desai junks "the stereotype of the entrepreneur as a single-minded moneymaker" in favor highlighting the singular nature of the "dream" of the Indian "entrepreneur" in East Africa: "***Thousands of people coming together in a common enterprise***—this is the dream of the entrepreneur, a dream that Madhvani shares with all his predecessors—Ebrahamji Adamji, Sorabji Darookhanawala, Nanji Kalidas Mehta, Madatally Mehta, and many others. It is a dream of commerce with the universe, a romance with the workings of the marketplace, and one that insists on registering the fundamental complementarity rather than conflict between capital and labour" (author's emphasis, p. 150).

The book overlooks the fact that this marvelous "dream" of Indian men of business in the African continent is also founded on centuries of undeniable complicity with the European colonizers, a sharing of worldviews, reductive colonial metaphors and prejudices concerning "black" African people, expropriation of indigenous cultural and material landscapes, and characterized over the long centuries by processes of exploitation of slaves and later wage labor for material and symbolic profit, which makes it a particularly repulsive one.

At the risk of sounding Eurocentric, it will perhaps do good here to remember once again what good ol' Karl Marx said about the historical origins of capital: "If money, according to Augier, 'comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek,' capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."[8] Do we take these Indian businessmen's self-aggrandizing narratives of success at their face value, only because they inhabited multicultural colonial landscapes? Or do we think of the silent histories of blood, toil, and exploitation of the missing "people without history" that could have been addressed, at least spoken of as being lost to history, cultural memory, and the newer confusion of identities in the present? To read "romance" and "fundamental complementarity" between capital and labor in the colonial world, however, is to participate in a tradition of Western historiography as abhorrent as the ethnic and nationalist prejudices in literature this book seeks to counter.

Notes

[1]. V. Y. Mudimbe, ***The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 14-15.

[2]. Gaurav Desai, ***Subject to Colonialism: African Self-Fashioning and the Colonial Library*** (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 4-9.

[3]. Claire Chambers, "Anthropology as Cultural Translation: Amitav Ghosh's ***In an Antique Land*****," *Postcolonial Text*** 2, no 3 (2006): 62-70.

[4]. Eduardo Galeano, ***Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*** (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 267.

[5]. Paul Gilroy, ***The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*** (London and New York: Verso), 15.

[6]. Gilroy, ***The Black Atlantic***, 44.

[7]. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ***Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4.

[8]. Karl Marx, ***Capital***, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 712.

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