

Report on
Joint International AFRASO Symposium
“Afrasian Interactions:
Current Dynamics
Future Perspectives”



Group photo of some of the delegates and volunteers

The CoHaB IDC, University of Mumbai had organized a joint international symposium on “Afrasian Interactions: Current Dynamics Future Perspectives”, with Goethe University, Frankfurt and Gandhi Studies Centre, Dr. BMN College of Home Science, Mumbai on 26th and 27th of June, 2018. The symposium witnessed engaging research papers by scholars hailing from Kenya, South Africa, Germany, USA and India.

The objective of the symposium was to reach beyond the diplomatic ties between Africa and Asia and bring to the forefront, the current entanglement of these continents by focusing on areas such as literary studies, material culture, history, education, cultural geography and documentary films. African-Indians have received increasing media and academic attention as

they gradually rediscovered their African links. New memoirs written by Indian-Africans have captured trans-regional imaginaries and memories, in an ostensibly decolonized space.

The official opening of the symposium took place at the Orchid Hotel, Mumbai. The welcome address was given by the Chief Guest – Professor Usha Thakkar, President of Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya, Mumbai. Dr. Shilpa P. Charankar (Principal, Dr. BMN College) was the special guest at the ceremony.



Opening ceremony of the Symposium

Panel 1 was chaired by Dr. Mala Pandurang. Pheroze Nowrojee was the first to present his paper, entitled - “The Indian Freedom Struggle and the Kenyan Diaspora: Values across the Ocean, 1916-1963”. Nowrojee argued that the events in Kenya critically affected the course of Indian Independence. It was the Kenyan Indians’ struggle for equality and dignity in Kenya with the White Supremacist settlers and the events in Kenya (1919-23), leading to the Devonshire Declaration that brought about two pivotal changes in India: the first was a shift in Congress and Gandhi from the goal of *Swaraj* and Dominion Status within the Empire, to the aim of complete Independence as a Republic. The second was that by the national support for this changed aim, Congress was transformed from a party of professionals into a mass movement for an irreversible national demand.



Professor Dr. Frank Schulze-Engler presenting his paper

Professor Dr. Frank Schulze-Engler presented a paper entitled – “Afrasia at War: Transregional Imaginaries Beyond the Indian Ocean”. His paper explored the fictional and documentary accounts of African soldiers in Asia, focusing on Biyi Bandele’s novel *Burma Boy* (2007) and argued that the transregional imaginaries linking Africa and India, to be encountered in this text, are not confined to historical relations across the Indian Ocean, but are intricately tied to new ‘Afrasian’ interactions, experiences and conflicts.



Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha presenting her paper

Professor Dr. Nilufer Bharucha's paper was titled – "Memoir and Memory: Nowrojee's Journey into Kenyan Landscapes'. Dr. Bharucha re-read Nowrojee's family memoir, *A Kenyan Journey* as a 're-memory'/'post-memory' text. Many cinematic and literary texts have dealt with re-memory, which refers to shared traumas and can thus be related not just to the private but to public or even nation spaces. Bharucha looked at Nowrojee's family memoir as a text that through its prologue and epilogue located itself in the national spaces of Kenya.



Delphine Munos presenting her paper

This panel ended with Delphine Munos' paper – "Foregrounding Gender through Genre: Afrasian Entanglements and Generic Ambiguities in Sultan Somjee's *Bead Bai*". While some critics call this novel as "ethnographic fiction" or "ethnographic creative nonfiction", Munos delved into the ways in which the 'genre-bending' aspects of *Bead Bai* participate in retracing the little-known history of Afrasian entanglements for Asian-African women, who sorted out, arranged and looked after ethnic beads during colonial times in East Africa.



Professor Dr. Sridhar Rajeswaran presenting his paper

Panel 2: Gandhi Studies Perspective chaired by Professor Dr. Nilufer Bharucha witnessed interesting interventions in the fields of history, social work and education which worked in tandem with Gandhian values. The panel opened with Professor Dr. Sridhar Rajeswaran's paper – "A Mahatma in Waiting: The Diasporic Gandhi Re-visited". The paper traversed times and spaces in which Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi attained his life experiences and in which he practiced and perfected his political and personal philosophies that contributed not just to his own growth, but to the evolution of India, from a colony into an independent nation.



Kanya Padayachee presenting her paper

This was followed by Kanya Padayachee's paper – "Afrasian Entanglements: Reinforcing Democracy in South Africa through Gandhian Values". Miss Padayachee established a link between the Gandhian concept of social welfare – '*sarvodaya*' and the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which includes caring for one another's well-being in the spirit of mutual support in ways that demonstrate that people are people through other people. As an active member of the Gandhi Development Trust (GDT), Miss Padayachee spoke about the education programmes of GDT which are based on the ideals of holistic education, the incorporation of the mental, spiritual and physical, which resonate with the values of Ubuntu, for the restoration through education of the values that have become eroded as a consequence of centuries of colonialism and decades of apartheid. The panel was concluded by Dr. Mala Pandurang's paper – "Teaching and Researching of African Writing in Indian Academia: A Gandhian Studies Intervention". The focus of this paper was to understand why the interest in literary narratives by African writers has not been sustained in Indian Academia, despite the growing exchange place between India and the African continent today, in terms of economics, trade and political engagements.



Professor Dr. Justus Makokha presenting his paper

Panel 3 was chaired by Professor Dr. Frank Schulze-Engler. Both the papers presented in this panel were on the Asian-African-Canadian writer M. G. Vassanji. J. K. S. Makokha opened

the panel with his paper – “M. G. Vassanji and the Psyche of History: A Reading of *The Magic of Saida*”. The novel is a work that is at the nexus between history and narratology. By way of New Historicism and postcolonialism, Makokha made an attempt to read the discourse of precolonial East African history and its attendant implications in the novel. The panel was concluded by Dan Ojwang. In his paper – “Vassanji’s Experiments in Ecumenical Secularity”, Ojwang tried to trace a genealogy of Vassanji’s ecumenical experiments by linking them to broad currents of literary and political thought in the contexts that have most markedly shaped Vassanji’s imagination: East Africa, India and North America. At the same time, Ojwang drew attention to the contradictions that haunt Vassanji’s vision of undivided polities.



Dr. Renu Modi presenting her paper

The first day of the symposium ended with Dr. Renu Modi’s paper, entitled – “Kanga: The Talking Cloth of the Indian Ocean World” which dealt with the transoceanic journey of *Kanga*, unique textile genres that are exported from India to various entrepôts in Africa. She spoke about how the designs requested by traders in Africa are improvised upon by local designers in India, thus creating the ‘hybrid’ material infused with Indian and African visual sensibilities. It was followed by the screening of her documentary film – *Connecting Threads: Made in India Fabrics for Africa*.



Mr. Edwin Lawrence Demla presenting his paper

On the second day, the symposium took place in the University of Mumbai, Kalina Campus. Panel 4 was chaired by John Njenga Karugia. The panel was opened by Mr. Edwin Lawrence Demla (a retired reverend from Rabai, the first place in Kenya where missionaries of the Church Missionary Society established a Christian mission), who spoke about the genealogy of the Bombay Africans in his paper entitled – “Freed Slaves and the Bombay Six within Rabai Mission”, which is a part of his personal narrative too. Bombay Africans is a reflection of a community whose culture and tradition shifted over a period of time due to slavery, religion and colonization. During his lifetime and just like the example of the change in spelling of his great grandfather’s name, he has experienced numerous of occurrences that make him question his identity.



Viloo Nowrojee presenting her paper

Next, Viloo Nowrojee presented her paper entitled – “Ceramics in Indian Ocean Trade: India and East Africa”. She traced the genealogy of what came to be known as ‘Zanzibar plates’ and the impact of material culture leading to dispersion of various cultures due to the transoceanic trade. The panel was brought to an end by Preeti Shiroadkar’s paper – “Spaces and Faces: Exploring Identity and Identification in M.G. Vassanji's Writing”. Shiroadkar argued that in the South-South dialogue, Vassanji becomes an important writer as he deals with concerns of identity and identification that lies at the centre of diasporic writing. A prolific writer, his work spans Africa, India, Canada and America and explores through a five pronged approach, which Shiroadkar attempted to delineate, the questions that move beyond the self to envelope the varied societies to which he belongs.

Panel 5 was chaired by Dan Ojwang. Neelima Jeychandran presented a paper, entitled – “Africa and the Malabar Coast: Sequestered Pasts, Living Memories, and Spirited Topographies”. Her paper examined how memories and imaginaries about Afro-Indian connections are constructed through the realm of spirited topographies on the Gold Coast in Ghana and on the Malabar Coast in India. By studying two contrasting sacred spaces and place-making practices (in Accra, Ghana and Kochi, India), Jeychandran sought to inquire how these sacred topographies operate as dynamic repositories of knowledge and are self-perpetuating matrices of symbolic meaning that generated renewed understandings of Afro-Indian exchanges.



John Njenga Karugia presenting his paper

The panel was concluded by John Njenga Karugia's paper – "Responsible Geographies of Afrasian Memories Within a Planetary Memory Perspective". By analyzing relational spaces in Africa and Asia, Karugia compared the representation of connective memories through analysis of a case that connects Suriname, Zanzibar and Oman. He argued that responsible geographies of memory must be rethought in order to take more seriously the implication of connective and disconnective cosmopolitan trans-oceanic imaginaries and memories.



Ramadhan Khamis talking about his documentary film

Panel 5 was followed by the screening of a documentary film “Afrasian Memories in East Africa” by Ramadhan Khamis (a Nairobi based film director and producer, whose works primarily deal with memory, culture and social justice issues) and John Njenga Karugia.



The symposium ended with a valedictory speech and a vote of thanks from the organizers.