



Cross-Cultural Encounters in Select Asian and African Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of cross-cultural encounters in select Asian and African fiction, with particular attention to the ways migration, colonial history, and diaspora produce fractured yet dynamic identities. Drawing primarily on M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, the study argues that cross-cultural contact in these texts is neither harmonious nor wholly destructive; rather, it creates a contested space in which identity is constantly negotiated. Scholarship on Vassanji repeatedly emphasizes double migration, memory, and the in-between position of Asian Africans, while work on diasporic assimilation highlights the tensions between belonging and exclusion. Through a postcolonial framework informed by hybridity, interstitiality, and diaspora studies, this article shows that cross-cultural encounters often generate alienation, racial anxiety, and cultural conflict, but also produce new forms of subjectivity and belonging. The paper contends that Asian and African fiction offers an important archive of transnational experience in which cultural difference is not erased through assimilation but reworked through struggle, negotiation, and memory.

Keywords

Cross-cultural encounter; diaspora; hybridity; identity; M. G. Vassanji; African fiction; Asian fiction; postcolonialism.

Introduction

Cross-cultural encounter has become one of the defining concerns of postcolonial literature because migration, empire, and globalization have transformed the meanings of home, nation, and identity. In Asian and African fiction, such encounters are rarely presented as simple meetings between cultures; instead, they emerge through unequal histories shaped by colonial power, racial hierarchy, and economic displacement. Research on M. G. Vassanji's fiction, for example, consistently notes that the Asian African subject occupies a world "in-between," suspended between black and white, homeland and hostland, memory and reinvention. This in-between condition makes cross-cultural contact deeply ambivalent, since it generates both opportunities for mobility and experiences of estrangement.



This paper studies cross-cultural encounters in select Asian and African fiction through a comparative reading of Vassanji's *No New Land* and Adichie's *Americanah*. The two texts belong to different historical and regional contexts, yet both foreground migrant lives shaped by racialization, memory, and the search for belonging. Existing scholarship on Vassanji highlights migration, environmental and cultural conflict, and the long history of South Asian movement from the subcontinent to East Africa and then to North America. Such work provides a useful foundation for comparing his fiction with African diasporic writing that similarly explores transnational identity and the emotional pressures of adaptation. The paper argues that cross-cultural encounters in these works are best understood not as moments of smooth integration, but as sites of tension where cultural boundaries are challenged, redefined, and partially transformed.

Theoretical framework

The concept of cross-cultural encounter in postcolonial studies extends beyond mere contact between communities. It refers to sustained interaction between cultures structured by unequal power relations, historical memory, and contested forms of representation. Studies on assimilation and diaspora repeatedly suggest that migration does not dissolve cultural identity into a homogeneous mainstream; rather, it produces paradoxical forms of adaptation in which belonging remains incomplete. In this sense, the postcolonial migrant becomes a figure of negotiation, inhabiting what may be called an interstitial space between inherited traditions and imposed social norms. Research on Asian African writing identifies this interstitiality as a central feature of Vassanji's literary imagination.

This framework becomes especially useful when read alongside the idea of hybridity. Hybridity does not imply a peaceful blending of cultures, but a contested process through which identity is reshaped under pressure. In literary texts, this process often appears through code-switching, altered family relations, racial self-consciousness, and competing memories of place. The scholarship on Vassanji's fiction shows that his characters' movements across South Asia, East Africa, and North America create layered identities that cannot be explained within single national or ethnic frameworks. Cross-cultural encounter therefore becomes a crucial site for examining how literature represents both the burdens and the creative possibilities of diasporic life.

Asian African interstitiality in Vassanji

In *No New Land*, Vassanji presents migration not as a fresh beginning but as an extension of earlier displacements. The characters move from East Africa to Canada carrying memories of another migration history rooted in colonialism. Scholarship on the novel stresses that the Asian African community in Vassanji's work has been shaped by South Asian migration to East Africa and by later secondary migration to North America, creating a distinctly layered diasporic consciousness. Because of this double migration, the novel complicates any stable definition of home. The migrants do not simply leave one nation for another; they carry multiple, unresolved histories that affect how they understand race, class, and belonging.

The cross-cultural encounters in the novel are often marked by discomfort and fragmentation. Canada appears as a space of promise, yet it also exposes migrants to exclusion, misunderstanding, and a subtle demand for assimilation. Studies of *No New Land* describe the cultural conflicts faced by Asian and African immigrants in Canada and underline how memory mediates every new social experience. The result is not full incorporation into the host society, but a condition of suspended attachment. Vassanji's characters learn to survive in multicultural settings, yet their identities remain unsettled because each encounter with the present reactivates the unresolved past.

Vassanji's importance lies in showing that cross-cultural experience is shaped not only by race and migration, but also by a specific Asian African historical position. One scholarly study describes this community as



inhabiting a “middle area” between European whiteness and African blackness, which gives rise to an interstitial consciousness central to Vassanji’s fiction. This observation helps explain why his characters often appear both connected and disconnected from the worlds they inhabit. They are never complete outsiders, yet they are never fully secure insiders either. Cross-cultural encounter thus becomes a permanent condition of living between worlds rather than a temporary stage on the way to assimilation.

African diasporic identity and encounter

In Adichie’s *Americanah*, cross-cultural encounter is articulated through race, gender, language, and the politics of visibility. The novel tracks the movement of an African woman into the United States and dramatizes how migration transforms self-perception under the pressure of American racial categories. Although the historical trajectory differs from Vassanji’s Asian African context, the experience of cultural translation remains central. The migrant must interpret herself through unfamiliar social codes while also resisting reduction to stereotype. This aligns with broader scholarship on diasporic assimilation, which argues that integration into dominant society often remains partial and conditional rather than complete.

What makes Adichie especially relevant to this topic is her insistence that cross-cultural encounter produces not only external conflict but also internal division. The protagonist’s encounters with new racial meanings, speech patterns, and social expectations reshape her consciousness and create a split between performed adaptation and inner continuity. In this respect, her experience parallels Vassanji’s diasporic figures, though the political context differs. Both writers show that cultural encounter is inseparable from power: one does not merely “meet” another culture but enters a field of unequal recognition. Assimilation, then, becomes a strategic and emotionally costly performance rather than a final resolution of difference.

The African diasporic dimension also expands the comparative value of this study. Where Vassanji explores the interstitiality of Asian Africans shaped by colonial labor and secondary migration, Adichie emphasizes the immediate visibility of blackness within the United States. Together, these writers reveal that cross-cultural encounter does not produce a single diasporic model. Instead, it generates different configurations of alienation and agency depending on how race, history, and geography intersect. Such a comparison helps illuminate the shared structures of dislocation across Asian and African fiction without erasing the distinct histories each text carries.

Comparative discussion

A comparative reading of these texts reveals that cross-cultural encounters are structured by three major dynamics: memory, racialization, and negotiation. First, memory prevents migration from being a clean break. In Vassanji, the past travels with the migrant in the form of East African history and South Asian ancestry; in Adichie, memory sustains an affective bond with homeland even while the migrant adapts to a new social world. Scholarship on Vassanji repeatedly underscores how memory and mobility are intertwined, making diaspora a layered historical formation rather than a present-tense event. This insight also helps explain why the present is always shadowed by another place and another time in cross-cultural fiction.

Second, racialization shapes the terms on which encounter occurs. Vassanji’s Asian African figures occupy an ambiguous position within black-white colonial and postcolonial orders, while Adichie’s African migrant confronts more direct forms of racial coding in the West. The scholarship on Asian African writing specifically emphasizes this “worlds in-between” status as a defining condition of Vassanji’s work. Cross-cultural interaction therefore cannot be reduced to multicultural exchange; it is filtered through historically produced hierarchies that determine who belongs, who is visible, and who remains suspect.



Third, both texts portray identity as negotiated rather than fixed. Their protagonists do not preserve cultural purity, nor do they disappear into dominant society. Instead, they improvise forms of belonging that are provisional, hybrid, and often unstable. This interpretation is strongly supported by scholarship describing Vassanji's fiction as a record of ambivalent affiliations, double migration, and postcolonial in-betweenness. Cross-cultural encounter, then, should be read as a productive tension: it wounds, unsettles, and disorients, yet it also opens imaginative possibilities for rethinking community and selfhood beyond narrow national definitions.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural encounters in select Asian and African fiction reveal that migration is never only physical movement; it is also a transformation of memory, language, and identity under unequal global conditions. Through Vassanji and Adichie, one can see that cultural contact is shaped by colonial histories, racial pressures, and the incomplete promises of assimilation. Studies on Vassanji in particular show how Asian African writing emerges from double migration and interstitial belonging, making it especially valuable for understanding diasporic complexity. These texts ultimately suggest that identity in postcolonial fiction is not inherited intact or surrendered completely, but continually remade through conflict, encounter, and negotiation.