

# A LIZARD FOR ALL SEASONS

A book review by Geoffrey Walton

This cat's-cradle of vivid autobiographical sketches strings themes backwards and forwards across decades and round the globe. The author, Mo Tejani, was born in Africa of Ismaili Muslim parents who had immigrated there during the colonial era. He grew up in Uganda through the heady, early years of independence. With the rise to power of Idi Amin Dada, the scene darkened as the despot began to implement a reign of terror. One of his earlier diktats, in 1972, enforced the expulsion of the 80,000 strong Asian communities (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and so on) at 90 days notice, imposing also a limit of 50 per head that each of them could carry out of the country. Chaos ensued.

Neither Britain nor India was willing to accept them as refugees, so the tension notched up as the nightmare violence mounted. Eventually, Commonwealth member Canada came to the rescue, and the exodus was on. Since Mo and his elder brother, Phiroz, already had British passports in anticipation of university studies there, that's where they landed up, while the rest of the large family headed for Canada.

The abrupt forced transition from tropical Africa to northern Europe resulted in severe culture shock compounded by the anguish of exile, along with fears for family members who were suffering comparable trials across the Atlantic. However, Mo was young, determined, and resilient. He adapted as best he could, while becoming acutely aware of being an outsider. A few years later, he moved to the USA to continue his studies, where once again he had to make difficult cultural adjustments. He later became intensely conscious of the necessity of repeating this process in his subsequent global travels. Wherever he found himself, he was the homeless outsider who had to adapt to local conditions to fit in with whichever group he was involved with. He began to see himself as a chameleon.

Mo is a feisty fellow with a raunchy sense of humour who shares two traits in common with Harry Flashman, the antihero of George McDonald Fraser's rambunctious historical novels. Wherever he goes, he absorbs new languages effortlessly, and he also gets endlessly involved with ladies of all nations and stations in life. The two activities are, of course, synergistic.

A cat's-cradle is a wide-spread game, popular especially with young girls, who take a length of string, knot it into a loop, and intertwine this around the outstretched fingers of each hand to form linear patterns between their hands. Virtuoso players can manipulate the loop to form a wide variety of aerial forms — in space over time.

These vibrant autobiographical cameos do not proceed in a straightforward temporal line but using the device of such themes as sex 'n' drugs 'n' rock roll, Peace Corps service, teaching English to refugees in camps in Asia in transit to America, aid projects in Third World countries, and so on, they zoom back and forth and through decades and span the globe. En route, the author introduces us to an extraordinary cast of people from many countries and backgrounds, quite apart from relating with relish his own adventures. Over time, he also observed firsthand some of the downside of international projects with huge budgets, staffed by professional bureaucrats. Here is a compendium of a traveler's tales with a distinct flavor from a unique viewpoint.

The writer has himself been by turns refugee, exile, and a seeker for meaning, while on a quest for self-identity through a century in rapid political and cultural metamorphosis. He has finally begun to come to terms with his life as a pilgrimage, since he increasingly realizes that for him the journey itself is in some sense the destination.

This self-dubbed chameleon, whether in fiery, elegiac, exuberant, or scathing mode, is a born story-teller.

The striking cover image for the book is by locally based art and lay-out designer Doug Morton. Paiboon Publishing was incorporated in 1996 in Berkeley, California, USA. They also have an office in Bangkok. [www.paiboonpublishing.com](http://www.paiboonpublishing.com).

