



A Chameleon's Tale
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True Colors

"I lost my home. My family, Shia Ismaili Muslims, the people of the Aga Khan, was forced apart and exiled to countries we had only heard of. Some of my friends went to different countries and continents, never to be heard from again. My country was no longer my own. This was the first time I became a chameleon." Thus starts Mo Tejani's life journey around the world in *A Chameleon's Tale*, True Stories of a Global Refugee.

Mo ends up in America, where the tone of his debut book is laid down: "Oriental spiritualism was one of the fads in America during the 1970's. The white suburbanites of Michigan wanted me to be their spiritual yogi. The black folks on the other side of the tracks thought I might be their Muslim brother from Africa. The American Indians from the Midwest adopted me as a kindred soul. Me? I just wanted to be free of all the categorical boxes that people caged me in to feel more comfortable around me. Unfortunately, the boxes followed me east and west."

Tejani's journey in search of himself, what "home" might really mean, and how one can never really escape the stereotypes and labels made world over makes for an enlightening and provocative read, taking the reader around the world along the way. Anyone who has spent years as an expatriate, as a dual citizen, or as someone of mixed ethnicity will certainly relate to Tejani's struggles for definition and meaning, and just about everyone will learn something about world geography, the politics of developmental aid, and what it means to be a westerner in the developing world.

After his family was kicked out of Uganda by Idi Amin (who forced all Asians to leave), he went to school in London and later ended up immersed in the counterculture of '70's America, finding solace in music, hallucinogens, and the hippie movement. He then went to work for the Peace Corps, doing a long stint in Thailand, which led to further involvement with humanitarian

aid organizations, starting with a SE Asian refugees post in Vietnam, and later moving on to Central and South America. Tejani has few good things to say about the waste that permeates the "help" movement, witnessing things like a training seminar held in Miami (for the aid organization he was working for), costing \$200,000 "for airfares, 5-star hotels, and nightly seafood buffets, rationalized in the organization's monthly newsletter as an investment in skills building that would generate long term returns. It was roughly 25% more than our annual training budget for 48,000 farmers in Thailand."

Tejani is well suited to offer real experiences from each country he goes to. A brilliant linguist, he speaks Swahili, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Thai, Spanish, and several other languages. He also gets involved with local music wherever he goes, stating that "music became my escape route to places where chameleons go to hide themselves in crowds, temporarily transformed by melodies and rhythms." He danced with Otavalo Indians to Inca music, saw Pink Floyd in London, and grooved at drum festivals in Thailand, relating each scene to his childhood gyrating in Kampala. Many of his anecdotes and world wanderings are not just random scribblings or travelogue, but tied to his youth and the residual effects of being uprooted from home.

His book also focuses on his various partners around the world, and how none of them seem to ultimately share his love for the road and for being free of stereotypes. Quite riveting is his passage on being caught up in the Asian tsunami in Thailand, and how he almost lost his girlfriend as well as his own life.

In an age of global nomads and individuals caught up in more than one world, *A Chameleon's Tale* deserves its place on a lot of bookshelves, and every traveler will find him or herself nodding in agreement with Mr. Tejani's observations.

- Dave Stamboulis