Afrasian Entanglements and Generic Ambiguities in Sultan Somjee's *Bead Bai*

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This article looks at Sultan Somjee's *Bead Bai* (2012), which focuses on Sakina, a member of the Satpanth Ismaili community living in mid-twentieth century Kenya. Based on nine years of research and interviews with Khoja women who now reside in Western Europe and North America, *Bead Bai* is generally described as an "historical novel" or an "ethnographic fiction," yet it also can be thought of as pertaining to the genre of what Brett Smith et al. (2015) call "ethnographic creative nonfiction." I discuss 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. More specifically, I will suggest that, by toying with the boundary between fiction and ethnography, Somjee opens new gendered avenues for reinserting the category of the imaginary at the heart of Afrasian entanglements.

Keywords: East Africa; Indian Ocean; Sultan Somjee; Asian African women; Khoja studies

In *Commerce with the Universe* (2013), Gaurav Desai remarks that, to the notable exception of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), "India and Indians have not received much representational space in the canon of colonial and postcolonial black African literature,"[2] and when they do appear, they are cast in a negative, one-dimensional light. Desai relies on Achille Mbembe and Mahmood Mamdani to suggest that Africa and Africanity can also be understood beyond the old colonial structures, which "divided society into ethnicized natives […] and a hierarchized order of racialized immigrants."[3] And the critic raises a fundamental question: "what happens to our understanding of Africa – its history, its sense of identity, its engagement

[1] The author wishes to thank Mala Pandurang, for having introduced her to the work of Sultan Somjee, and Inge Brinkman, for her generous feedback on an earlier draft of this article.
[2] Gaurav Desai, *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013): 3
[3] Desai, *Commerce with the Universe*, 6.

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?"[4]

Clearly, Desai can be seen as one of those critics who have sought to engage with what he calls, after Michael Pearson, the "Afrasian Imagination." As Sana Aiyar aptly remarks, since the early 2010s, there has been a significant rise of scholarly works putting Indians in East Africa "at the centre of studies of nationalism, race, and community,"[5] which has resulted not only in bringing together hitherto-compartmentalized disciplines such as South Asian, African, and diaspora studies, but also in engaging with issues of south-south relations and transregional Afrasian entanglements. And indeed, in addition to Desai, critics such as Gijsbert Oonk[6], Dan Ojwang[7], Margret Frenz[8], and Isabel Hofmeyr[9], among others, have proved key in complicating the generalized assumption that Indians in East Africa would boil down to the stereotype of the cunning trader and "exploitative parasit[e]"[10] – or that narratives of contact between Africans and Indians could be reduced to the colonial link and to the rigid three-tiered racial hierarchy put in place by the British. For Aiyar, this critical trend highlights the necessity of looking beyond the colonizer/colonized binary of 'mainstream' postcolonial theory, which also means re-historicizing the "*coexistence* of friction and solidarity"[11] between Asians and Africans in East Africa. After all, "migrants from South Asia included a large number of men, women, and children who encountered Africans in intimate spaces, in their shops, clinics, hotels, homes (where Indians hired African domestic help)."[12]

Shifting the focus to everyday encounters between Asians and Africans in colonial East Africa reveals, in turn, that there is an overwhelming lack of engagement with issues of gender in representations of Afrasian entanglements. Mala Pandurang thus observes that Indian and African women might enjoy relative visibility in fiction and nonfiction by writers of East African Asian origin such as M.G. Vassanji, Parita Mukhta, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown,

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[4] Desai, *Commerce with the Universe*, 6.
[5] Sana Aiyar, "Out of India: East Africa and its South Asian Diasporas," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora,* ed. Radha Sarma Hedge & Ajaya Kumar Sahoo (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018): 63.
[6] Oonk, Gijsbert. *Settled Stranger: Asian Business Elites in East Africa (1800-2000*) (New Delhi: Sage, 2013).
[7] Ojwang, Dan. *Reading Migration and Culture: The World of East African Asian Literature* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).
[8] Frenz, Margret. *Community, Memory, and Migration in a Globalizing World: The Goan Experience, c. 1890-1980*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[9] Hofmeyr, Isabel. "Universalizing the Indian Ocean," *PMLA* 125.3 (May 2010): 721-729.
[10] Melissa Tandiwe Myambo, "Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanism? M.G. Vassanji's Hybrid Parables of Kenyan Nationalism," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2007): 164.
[11] Sana Aiyar, "Out of India," 71. Emphasis in original.
[12] Sana Aiyar, "Out of India," 72.

Neera Kapur-Dromson, Jameela Siddiqui and Shailja Patel; still, there is a general tendency to focus exclusively on the lives of male Asian entrepreneurs (such as Allidina Virsam and Nasser Nurmohamed) and/or male Asian activists (such as Makhan Singh[13] and Manilal Ambalal Desai[14]) in nonfiction narratives reconstructing the experience of Asians in East Africa.[15]

This article looks at Sultan Somjee's *Bead Bai*, a generically-hybrid book which merges ethnography with fiction to narrate the coming of age of Sakina, a member of the Satpanth Ismaili community living in mid-twentieth century Kenya. The former head of ethnography at the National Museums of Kenya and the curator of the Asian African Heritage Exhibition (2000-2005), Somjee, through Sakina, reconstructs the lives of bead bais, that is, Asian (here Satpanth Ismaili) women who sorted out and oversaw the resale of imported beads to indigenous populations during colonial times in East Africa. Sakina's role as the wife of an Ismaili merchant implies regular exchanges with Maasai female patrons and daily interactions with Ole Lekakeny, a Maasai shop assistant, through whom she learns how to arrange coloured beads and visualize patterns so that she can later participate in creating her own *emankeeki*, a beaded neck-to-chest adornment worn by married Maasai women. In fact, Sakina learns how to transpose the skills and patterns of traditional Khoja *zari* embroidery into Maasai beadwork, thus embodying the possibility of evolving a cross-cultural sensibility and imaginary beyond the colonial policy of racial separation. In other words, in *Bead Bai*, Somjee does much more than just shift the focus away from the 'grand narrative' of male Asian traders and activists in East Africa, to the everyday lives of the wives, daughters, and mothers of the *dukawallah* community. While tuning down assumptions about the isolationist character of Asian communities in East Africa, the Kenya-born Canadian ethnographer of Ismaili origin refreshingly foregrounds "the place of art and aesthetics" in the reconstruction of Asian African diaspora narratives which usually "focus on issues of identity and the trauma

[13] See Zarina Patel's biography of Makhan Singh, the Kenyan Punjabi trade unionist: *Unquiet : The Life and Times of Makhan Singh* (Nairobi: Zand Graphics, 2006).
[14] See Zarina Patel's biography of Manila Ambalal Desai, the Kenyan Gujarati activist : *Manila Ambalal Desai: The Stormy Petrel* (Nairobi: Zand Graphics, 2010).
[15] See Mala Pandurang, "Imaginings of Khoja, Maasai and Swahili Aesthetics in Artist Ethnographer Sultan Somjee's Narratives." *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 4.3/4 (2018): 6. Iqbal Akhtar makes a similar point as regards "khoja communal histories," in which "the voices of women, the poor, and those in the periphery of the jamat ('community') structure are rarely found" (see Iqbal Akhtar, "Review of *Bead Bai*," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 12.1 (2016): n.p.). Godwin Siundu highlights the paradox that biographies of male Asian African figures by Kenyan Asian women writers such as Zarina Patel, Neera Kapur-Dromson, and Rasna Warah "appear to support male-authored history" and yet "add several layers of historical narratives" so that these books also show how Asian African women "are doubly excluded from national and communal narratives on account of racial difference and womanhood in a patriarchal society" (see Godwin Siundu, "Beyond Auto/Biography: Power, Politics, and Gender in Kenyan Asian Women's Writings," *Research in African Literatures* 42.3 (Fall 2011): 118).

of relocation."[16] Generally described as an "historical novel"[17] or as "ethnographic fiction,"[18] *Bead Bai* can also be thought of as pertaining to the genre of "ethnographic creative nonfiction."[19] My main goal in this article is to show how, in *Bead Bai*, the crossover of fact and fiction – indeed the 'genre-bending' aspects of the book – excavates the little-known history of Afrasian entanglements for Asian African bead bais and participates in re-inscribing their life-narratives into Eastern African history writ large. More specifically, I will suggest that, by toying with the boundary between fiction and ethnography, Somjee opens new gendered avenues for reinserting the category of the imaginary at the heart of Afrasian entanglements.

In the Introduction to *Bead Bai*, Somjee explains the origins of the Satpanth Khoja faith and caste identity, which is itself a minority religion in India, as it represents a unique syncretism between Hinduism and Islam and merges the teachings of Hindu gurus and Moslem pirs.[20] Migration has become a defining feature of the Satpanth Ismaili or Satpanth Khoja community from the mid-19th century onwards, as it was based in parts of Saurashtra (which denotes parts of present-day Gujarat, Kutch, Sindh, and adjacent border areas of Rajasthan[21]) and developed trade networks running from the East Coast of Africa towards the Congo – increasingly so following the completion of the Uganda Railway in 1902. Satpanth Ismaili merchants sold beads, among other goods, to ethnic people in British East Africa, leaving it to their wives to run the family stores – or at the very least lend a hand in the family business. In that way, Asian merchants' wives, daughters, and mothers came in contact with indigenous men and women. Importantly, this contact far exceeded a mere customer-merchant relationship only, as it required women of the dukawallah community to speak vernacular languages, even to get acquainted with the visual aesthetics of the Maasai, or that of the Kikuyu, among other ethnicities, so the bead bais, as they were called, could sort out the

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[16] Mala Pandurang. "Imaginings of Khoja, Maasai and Swahili Aesthetics," 2.
[17] Akhtar, "Review of *Bead Bai*," 1.
[18] Sultan Somjee, Interview with Zafar Anjum, *Kitaab* (8 September 2013), https://kitaab.org/2013/09/08/sultan-somjee-i-think-of-my-novel-as-an-ethnographic-fiction/ (accessed 1 April 2019).
[19] Brett Smith et al., "Ethnographic Creative Nonfiction: Exploring the what's, why's and how's." In *Ethnographies in Sport and Exercise Research,* ed. Gyozo Molnar & Laura Purdy (London: Routledge, 2015): 59-73. Brett Smith et al.'s definition of "creative nonfiction" appears to be particularly pertinent to Somjee's *Bead Bai*, as this genre is seen by the critics to "offe[r] a deeply embodied, sensorial and relational account of human lives." They add: "Human lives are not experienced in a sensorial vacuum but are sometimes guided by a combination of smells, tastes, textures, sounds, touch, and what we see or do not see. Our actions, behaviours, and emotions emerge from social relationships, not from individual minds" (63).
[20] In *Bead Bai*, excerpts from the ginan of Das Avatar (as recited by Sakina) underline the 'neither/nor' character of the Khoja Satpanth faith : "Neither here nor there, *I am*; neither this nor that; *I am*; neither a Hindu nor a Musalman, *I am*. A worshipper at the threshold of both, *I am*" (See Sultan Somjee, *Bead Bai* (Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012): 162; emphasis in original).
[21] See Somjee, *Bead Bai*, i.

specific kinds of beads the different ethnic communities needed to create ornaments and artwork. In her combined reading of Somjee's *Bead Bai* and of its sequel, *Home between Crossings* (2016), Mala Pandurang aptly remarks that the two books explore how material culture in general – specifically beads in *Bead Bai* and kangas in *Home between Crossings* – "enabl[e] a unique interface between Asian women and the indigenous communities".[22]

Bead Bai tells the story of Sakina, a member of the Satpanth Ismaili community who was born in 1922 in Nairobi – on March 15th, the very day of the Kipande massacre[23] – and who relocates in the wake of an arranged marriage to Nairowua, in the heart of Maasailand, which straddles the borders of Kenya and Tanzania. Although the book was based on nine years of research and on interviews with Ismaili-Khoja women who now reside in Western Europe and North America,[24] it is clear from the very start that Somjee will turn to fiction to give flesh, so to speak, to his female protagonist. As the writer acknowledges in the Introduction, "though inspired by real events […], this work is fiction. It began with observations, listening, and pondering over photo albums […] It has been greatly extended by my imagination and tinted by my impressions, perceptions and understanding of what I remember, and how the events and characters took shape, and were re-shaped during the course of writing."[25] In an interview with *Kitaab*'s editor Zafar Anjum, Somjee also points out that, for him, ethnography is not just about listening to and then transcribing stories. It also requires ethnographers to be active participants, that is, to "keep [their] senses open to what could inform [them] about the families, events and locations."[26] And Somjee adds that it is by listening through one's senses that the mere observation of gestures can "inform the unsaid."[27] Somjee's suggestion that ethnographers are not passive receptacles, but "secretaries

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[22] Mala Pandurang. "Imaginings of Khoja, Maasai and Swahili Aesthetics," 4.

[23] The Kipande massacre took place on 15 March 1922, the next day after freedom fighter Harry Thuku, one of the founders of the Young Kikuyu Association (later renamed the EAA or the East African Association), was confined in the Nairobi police station by colonial officials. Thuku was protesting various colonial injustices, among them the Kipande, a pass control scheme enabling settlers to keep track of African adult males over the age of 16. On March 15th 1922, the EAA called for a general strike and organized a demonstration to liberate Thuku. Male strikers were about to disperse, however, when Mary Nyanjiru raised her skirt to heap scorn on the men, thus taking crowd leadership and goading male demonstrators of the EAA into taking action. As Audrey Wipper remarks, "That the women were seen as heroines in African eyes is evident from the song, the 'Kanyegenuri' [an anthem of resistance during the Mau Mau struggle], which commemorates their deeds, especially the bravery of Mary Nyanjiru." (See Audrey Wipper, "Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy,"*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 59. 3 (1989): 317).

[24] See Akhtar, "Review of *Bead Bai*," 1. Following the independence of East African nations, which went hand in hand with the Africanization of local economies and a generalized anti-Asian feeling in East Africa, a great number of East African Asians re-migrated to the West. It is thus unsuprising that Somjee's interviewees and former bead bais are now based in Western Europe and North America.

[25] Somjee, *Bead Bai*, vii.

[26] Somjee, "Interview with Zafar Anjum," np.

[27] Somjee, "Interview with Zafar Anjum," np.

of the invisible,"[28] to borrow the graphic self-definition wielded by Elizabeth Costello, one of J.M. Coetzee's novel-writing female characters, is reminiscent of the "dialogue" between "horizontal" and "vertical" approaches to lives – or between ethnography and fiction – that the anthropologist and sociologist Didier Fassin seeks to initiate. For Fassin, although ethnography is generally associated with reality – that which "exist[s] on the surface of fact"[29] – and fiction is generally considered to be the province of truth – that which "has to be regained from deception or convention"[30] – it remains that "anthropology is fundamentally an attempt to articulate the real and the true – the horizontal and the vertical – in the exploration of life."[31] The suggestion that the 'truth' of Afrasian entanglements intersects with, even is derived from, a subjective or even sensuous grasp of reality, is emphasized in the very first pages of *Bead Bai*. Interestingly, the historical reality of the Indian shantytown bazaar in Nairobi is first presented on a horizontal plane, so to speak, through a factual account by Shri Amritlal Raishi, "a well-known pioneer businessman and a respected elder of the Oshwal merchant community in East Africa."[32] Ironically, Raishi's (male) description of the Indian bazaar in terms of raw data – which range from the size of the Indian Commercial Area in Nairobi, to the square footage of its cramped one-storeyed buildings, to the average number of people per household, to the anatomy of the merchants' castes and communal identities – is soon juxtaposed to an origin story told in the first person, one in which the (female) narrator urges her readership to "feel" [her] story,"[33] thus implicitly begging them to leave behind Raishi's horizontal/objective approach. Expressing her sensuous grasp of colonial Nairobi through sounds, the I-narrator then wields visual imagery to better transport her readers to a narrative realm where, better than words, figures and raw data, senses and feelings become a touchstone for reality:

> Within the sounds gr…gr… grinding of stone mills, bazaar-business bustle, family blusters in tin roofed store-homes, temple bells and muezzin calls, is a story that has as many shapes as the sounds and smells of oriental Nairobi. Sometimes my story looks like a square, sometimes a triangle, and sometimes it's a circle. Hear me and feel my story when you see how the lines of all shapes meet,

[28] J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003): 199.
[29] Didier Fassin, "True Lives, Real Lives: Revisiting the boundaries between ethnography and fiction," *American Ethnologist* 41.1 (2014): 41.
[30] Fassin, "True Lives, Real Lives," 41.
[31] Fassin, "True Lives, Real Lives," 41.
[32] Somjee, *Bead Bai*, 1.
[33] *Bead Bai*, 7.

> some earlier, and some later, as the story is told. I am the steward of my feelings inside and my words outside. They are one in my story.[34]

Commenting on "the never-resolved tension between the individual and the collective" in another African context, namely that of post-apartheid South Africa, Fassin writes that history is "deeply embodied, both objectively, through the material conditions in which [ethnographic subjects] live, and subjectively, via the affects, narratives, and imagination they produce."[35] By situating the birth of her protagonist on the day of the Kipande massacre – at the same hour when "a hail of gunshots"[36] announces the shooting down of freedom fighter Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru by colonial officials at that – Somjee indirectly inserts Sakina into the history of Kenya's fight for freedom and into a broader African narrative of anticolonial struggle, one that can be attested to in history books (though Nyanjiru's crucial role in what is generally called the Harry Thuku Riot remains blatantly overlooked).[37] However, the fictional twist that Somjee's protagonist remains dumbfounded[38] during her first four years complicates such national predetermination, as it were, by silently gesturing towards a parallel history, one that is signified through the body. Suggestively, Sakina's Asian community believes that her speechlessness owes to the fact that "the massacre had shocked [her] at birth"[39]– and yet, it can also be said that her symptom signifies on the silences and contradictions that Nyanjiru's display of female militancy elicits among the members of her family.

Sometimes presented as one of the "unsung heroines of Kenyan history,"[40] Nyanjiru led a group of women to storm the Nairobi police station to demand the release of the nationalist leader Harry Thuku, after having stripped naked and asked her male companions to give her their trousers[41] in an attempt to shame them and goad them into taking action. Commenting on the collective activity of African – specifically Kikuyu – women during the Harry Thuku riot, Audrey Wipper observes that, despite their formal

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[34] *Bead Bai*, 7.
[35] Fassin, "True Lives, Real Lives," 45.
[36] *Bead Bai*, 14.
[37] See Audrey Wipper, "Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy,"*Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 59. 3 (1989): 300-337.
[38] *Bead Bai*, 13.
[39] *Bead Bai*, 13.
[40] See the entry on Nyanjiru in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (Oxford University Press: 2008). DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780195148909.001.0001.
[41] Job Muchuchu, a founding member of the Young Kikuyu Association who had firsthand knowledge of the Harry Thuku Riot, thus remembers Nyanjiru's words of defiance: "You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for ? Our leader is in there. Let's go get him!" (cited in Wipper, "Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances," 315).

subordination to men, African women achieved a strong political voice by simultaneously challenging colonial *and* male authority. In *Bead Bai*, Nyanjiru's murder by the colonial authorities prompts Sakina's Asian community to question traditional gendered roles while making sense of the Kenyan anticolonial struggle by relying on Gandhi's militancy and Indian myths, which causes the protagonist to remark how, in her childhood, "Indian politics – tales of heroes and traitors – blended into African politics."[42] The suggestion that Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru's African legacy of gendered insubordination is somehow inscribed in Sakina's destiny is emphasized through the nickname that native workers give the protagonist – namely Muthoni – even as her own family "hushe[s] down this name whenever it [is] spoken lest it would stay with [her]"[43].

The much-conflicted porousness of the Asian community to Kenyan politics is also evidenced in the subtle gender rift that Nyanjiru's act of female militancy opens in Sakina's family, which grants the female protagonist (and by extension, the narrative) a form of stereoscopic perspective. In the women-only space of the kitchen, Sakina thus hears her stepmother Ma Gor Bai repeat Nyanjiru's words of defiance, using the Kikuyu heroine as a role-model to tentatively challenge the ideology of male superiority: "Give me, a woman, your trousers […] A woman wanting to wear a man's trousers? Throwing stones at the English? What did she want? Can a woman do that?"[44] Still, at the dinner table, a space reserved for "men's talk, important talk,"[45] Sakina witnesses the male members of her family reconciling themselves to Nyanjiru's act of female militancy by conveniently recasting the heroine as a mother with "a child still feeding at her breast,"[46] which enables them to tune down the full gendered implications of the freedom fighter's intervention while retaining its anticolonial dimension. Twisting Nyanjiru's story around so that it becomes that of an orphaned child deprived of his mother because of the colonial authorities – something that angers "the land's mamta motherhood,"[47] as Sakina's grandfather Dadabapa remarks – the male members of Sakina's family end up seeing in the Kikuyu heroine a modern-day Draupadi, which further legitimizes her transgression of gender norms by way of Indian myths,

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[42] *Bead Bai*, 14.
[43] *Bead Bai*, 14.
[44] *Bead Bai*, 19-21.
[45] *Bead Bai*, 22.
[46] *Bead Bai*, 23.
[47] *Bead Bai*, 23.

specifically the *Mahabharata*: "Here in Nairobi, Draupadi was declothed and Krishna could not save her."[48] Sakina, on her part, is aware that her community's penchant for "blending stories Asian African,"[49] to mention the title of one of *Bead Bai*'s chapters, is an organic process that knows no beginning and no end, one that transcends the objective/subjective divide by being closely connected to her senses. Conscious of the fact that "stories [are] listened to in the body,"[50] that they have the potential to "[hold] her emotions together like patches stitched by events,"[51] the protagonist notes that, during her childhood, "local stories about the wars of ethnic people against the raj were retold mixing past and present, from the days of protests of railway coolies to the present-day anti-head-tax marches."[52] She adds, "In the gigantic pattern of the Empires that repeated itself across the seas and continents, the stories of India and Africa were entwined like my own."[53]

If Sakina's birth on the day of the Kipande massacre operates as a fictional device to reveal the conflicted and yet organic porousness of the Ismaili community to their Kenyan environment during colonial times, Somjee also utilizes the literary device of a story within a story; firstly, to re-historicize segments of the history of emigration of the Ismaili community from Gujarat; secondly, to insert the history of Siddis into Asian African historiography; and thirdly, to offer rare gendered perspectives on the crossing of the Kala Pani and on processes of community-making (and community-reshuffling) for the different Khoja sub-sects in colonial East Africa. As noted before, the 'grand narrative' of Gujarati traders to East Africa is one that is generally gender-blind, in that it privileges male entrepreneur figures such as Allidina Visram, who is celebrated as the "uncrowned King of Uganda"[54] or as "the King of the Commercial Empire in East Africa."[55] Also, the fact that the stereotype of the cunning, exploitative Indian trader was used as a trope by political leaders in the contexts of postcolonial Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda[56] has participated in constructing a homogeneously privileged and male-centred image of the dukawallah community in East Africa, one that is firmly rooted, moreover, within a nationalist framework. Such framework glosses over the

[48] *Bead Bai*, 24.
[49] *Bead Bai*, 41.
[50] *Bead Bai*, 30.
[51] *Bead Bai*, 33.
[52] *Bead Bai*, 28.
[53] *Bead Bai*, 33.
[54] Desai, *Commerce with the Universe,* 113.
[55] *Bead Bai*, 120.
[56] Aiyar, "Out of India," 62.

plurality of ethnic, gender, and class identities that formed the Asian African community during colonial times; it also ignores the diversity of push factors that caused emigration from India, which ranges from economic opportunism, to sexual abuse (for women migrants), to natural disasters such as droughts and famines.

In *Bead Bai*, Sakina stands at her grandfather's bedside as he is down with malaria, and this plot twist enables Somjee to dramatize the "inside story"[57] of the first generation – one that is generally silenced on account of various prescriptions, both self-imposed and imposed by the community. Sakina is well aware that, had he not been ill, her grandfather would never have "revealed the secret in him" and allowed himself to "wander to the Saurashtra of his childhood in the concealed part of his mind,"[58] fast-forwarding, at times, to "the great famine of Saurashtra" (or "Famine of Fifty Six"), which precipitated his departure from India. Interestingly, the colonial link is very much present in Dadabapa's story of leaving the homeland, as he embarks on a dhow after "repeated colonial taxes"[59] intensified the effects of the famine in Saurashtra. The fact that Dadabapa uses the present tense in his account highlights the continuity of colonial exploitation between the Nairobi of the 1920s, where African natives demonstrated against head taxes, and the Gujarat of 1903, where Indian peasants would give away "the gunnysacks of [their] dwindled harvest [to the colonial agents] in payment of taxes [they] could not pay in rupees", and consequently had no choice but "sell their wooden plough and tools to buy food, and even water."[60]

Even if the socio-historical context of early-twentieth century Gujarat makes Dadabapa's emigration inevitable, the fact that his mother sells her jewellery to pay for his voyage exacerbates a sense of guilt at "losing the land" and "breaking the bond of lineage nurtured by the ancestral field."[61] Witnessing her grandfather burst into tears and ask for her forgiveness because he muddles up the past and the present and takes her to be his own mother, Sakina is not just made privy to the trauma of dislocation at a generational remove; she is directly thrust into it, as if no time had passed. Perhaps unsurprisingly in such a context, she comes to imagine herself on the dhow, "standing there on the rocking deck with [her grandfather], holding his hand so [she] is not thrown overboard," and she is able to enter

[57] *Bead Bai*, 58.
[58] *Bead Bai*, 58.
[59] *Bead Bai*, 58.
[60] *Bead Bai*, 59.
[61] *Bead Bai*, 67.

Dadabapa's memories so vividly that she feels she can even "watch the waves leaping at the bow and feel the moist breeze wetting [her] face."[62]

Refreshingly, however, Dadabapa's malaria-enabled storytelling moves away from a now-classic diasporic narrative of departure-as-trauma and takes on a more ethnographic and multidirectional turn by revealing, for instance, how emigration to Africa was caste-streamed. Indeed, even if Dadabapa insists that the cumulative effect of the great famine of Saurashtra and colonial taxes caused a large-scale exodus involving members of a great variety of castes – ranging from the Banyan caste of shopkeepers, from that of peasant farmers and masons, to "the low caste cleaners" and "the untouchables of Saurashtra"[63] – he also makes it clear that not everyone left for East Africa. "[Speaking] of his past as if it was today and now,"[64] Dadabapa recounts that, back in Gujarat, a "frenzied Brahmin" lamented the departure of the low castes, exclaiming: "who will remove the dog's carcass, four days old, rotting, stinking at the temple's steps?"[65] Perhaps more importantly, Dadabapa also alludes to exchanges taking place on the occasion of panchayat councils where the assembly would send delegates to inquire why the African Siddis had chosen to stay behind. Again, by using the plot twist of Dadabapa's malaria, Somjee offers rare insights into segments of transoceanic historiography that bypass the East/West divide of the postcolonial paradigm – here the tense relations between Indians and African Siddis whose ancestors were brought to India as slaves, soldiers, traders, clerics, bodyguards, and sailors from the thirteenth century onward.[66] Touching upon the relatively overlooked history of African Siddis and their ostracism in India, Dadabapa remembers that, even when faced with utter starvation, the Siddis of Saurashtra resorted to "slave memories"[67] to explain their resolve to not return to Africa, their ancestral land, making it clear that they would never really feel themselves at home in India either. Dadabapa's account even includes a wry remark by a Siddi elder, who satirically observes that the "heads [of the panchayats of Saurashtra] are full of what the English did to the Indians, not what the Indians did to the Africans."[68]

But certainly the most interdicted segment of Dadabapa's "inside story" as mediated by Sakina relates to the traumatic crossing of the Kala Pani, which gives pride of place to a small group of 'passenger' women migrants trying to "run away from their destinies written

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[62] *Bead Bai*, 89.
[63] *Bead Bai*, 59.
[64] *Bead Bai*, 71.
[65] *Bead Bai*, 60.
[66] See Isabel Hofmeyr, "Universalizing the Indian Ocean," *PMLA* 125.3 (May 2010): 726.
[67] *Bead Bai*, 63.
[68] *Bead Bai*, 64.

on the walls of Ma Daam Begum's famous kotha [brothel] in Bombay."[69] Indian Ocean social sciences scholars such as Kalpana Hiralal remark that, while it is now attested that a significant number of Indian indentured women migrants travelled on their own,[70] by contrast, 'passenger' or free women migrants coming from the subcontinent "arrived as part of family migration" to East and South Africa or "as adjuncts to men in the migration process."[71] What follows is that, in spite of major gaps in the archive,[72] 'passenger' female migrants are generally presented to have been less susceptible to sexual abuse or – as seen from the other end of the telescope – are perceived to have been less agentive than their indentured counterparts. Dadabapa's account complicates such over-simplistic passenger/indentured divide by telling the story of prostitutes who left Gujarat with no money but still "took a chance to freedom"[73] by making a few rupees at night on the dhow so they could pay a little every day towards their passage to Africa. Sakina realizes that her grandfather "never mention[s] [the] names [of the prostitutes] in the house, let alone their stories, except when malaria make[s] him delirious and speak out the secrets in his head"[74].

This is not to say that Somjee's narrative leaves it entirely to Dadabapa – or rather to the malaria-induced "pictures"[75] he talks to during his illness – to offer what could only have been, at best, a sketchy account of Meethi Bai's, Gulzar Bai's, Soneri Bai's, and Devdasi Rupa Bai's life-stories. Similarly to what happens with Nyajiru's act of female militancy, whose complex influence can only be unpacked by Sakina's stepmother in the women-only space of the kitchen, the story of the four prostitutes and the ways in which it intersects with processes of community-reshuffling for the Khojas in colonial East Africa is indeed relayed by female members of the community as they get together to prepare food and help one another "turn the stone mill."[76] Significantly, Ma Gor Bai tells Meethi Bai's story to Sakina

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[69] *Bead Bai*, 87.
[70] As regards the Caribbean, specifically Trinidad, Rodha Reddock remarks that a significant of female migrants heading for the sugar colonies did so as single, unaccompanied women. See Rodha Reddock, "Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago 1845-1917," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20.43 (1985): 79-87. This trend is confirmed by Brij Lal as regards Fiji; see Brij Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through Indenture in* Fiji (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2012). It is worth mentioning that the rehabilitation of the "paradigm of the single [Indian indentured] woman migrant" in recent Indo-Caribbean literature is notably explored by Mariam Pirbhai. See Mariam Pirbhai, "Recasting the *Jahaji-Bhain*: Plantation History and the Indo-Caribbean Women's Novel in Trinidad, Guyana, and Martinique," *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women's Literature*, ed. Joy Mahabir and Mariam Pirbhai (London and New York: Routledge, 2013): 25-47.
[71] Kalpana Hiralal, "Gendered Migrations: A comparative study of indentured and non-indentured immigrants to South Africa 1860–1930", *Diaspora Studies* 9.1 (2016): 44.
[72] Kalpana Hiralal, "Gendered migrations," 44.
[73] *Bead Bai*, 87.
[74] *Bead Bai*, 195-196.
[75] *Bead Bai*, 64.
[76] *Bead Bai*, 206.

"in secret."[77] As for the life-stories of the three other prostitutes or "Bombay ladies,"[78] as they are called by the community, they are told to Sakina by Meethi Bai herself, who "press[es] [her] three fingers to [her] lips, the way Indian women do, to show these women have no sharam that is shame."[79] Still, Sakina realizes that "this gesture of utter horror shows it is something [Indian women] should not talk about, yet they must tell you."[80] And what Meethi Bai reveals is that a sense of dogged faithfulness and fierce independence is central to the lives of these "Bombay ladies" who are othered and stigmatized as *absakan* (inauspicious) by the community. Gulzar Bai and Soneri Bai are indeed driven out of their married homes because they refuse to abandon their Satpanth faith and follow their husbands' conversion to more recent Khoja sub-sects; both women decide, moreover, to retain a sense of agency by neither returning to their parents' houses nor entering an ashram. As for Devdasi Rupa Bai, who is dedicated at birth to Ambe Ma's temple in Bombay and gets trained there "in the ancient arts of devotional songs, dance, and sacred sex," she is expelled by activists from her sanctuary, "together with [her] infant cradled in her arms."[81] Having heard of other kotha women who "managed to sail away in the dhow to the Indies, Fiji, America and Africa," the three women plan their escape to Zanzibar as 'passenger' women and join Meethi Bai's lodge upon arrival in Africa. The three women later on re-marry thanks to the "opulent dowries" Meethi Bai sets aside for them, whom she sees – and somehow rehabilitates – as "her daughters born out of the circumstances that she shared like sisters in a family."[82]

A clear attempt at both gendering transoceanic historiography and humanizing absakan women, Somjee's device of a story within a story gestures towards, and yet exceeds, communal censorship. So it can only be through eavesdropping that Sakina is finally able to piece together the life-story of her absakan stepmother, who describes herself as a "cursed"[83] woman to her friend Meethi Bai, because she was abandoned by her husband after he left Saurashtra for Africa. Having waited for him in vain during seven years, Ma Gor Bai finally embarks for Africa as a 'passenger' woman and discovers, upon arrival, that her husband has in fact three children by his Swahili wife. Ma Gor Bai is then left with little choice but enter an ashram or kill herself, which would have replicated what happened to Jee Bai, a fourteen-year-old absakan widow who, as Sakina's stepmother remembers, threw herself into the

[77] *Bead Bai*, 194.
[78] *Bead Bai*, 195.
[79] *Bead Bai*, 196.
[80] *Bead Bai*, 196.
[81] *Bead Bai*, 198.
[82] *Bead Bai*, 202.
[83] *Bead Bai*, 213.

Indian Ocean and was then positively consecrated by her Asian community as having "freed herself from the disgrace of lifetime mothaj [community charity]."[84] Convincing herself that "Africa is the land of the second chance,"[85] Sakina's stepmother finally decides to "defy [her] destiny"[86] and starts making a living of zari embroidery, which she learnt from her grandmother, who, in turn, learnt it from her own mother. The matrilineal-like transmission of silenced or interdicted histories here merges with that of art, which is deeply connected to the material world in more senses than just one. Indeed, zari needlework is also a skill that Ma Gor Bai will train Sakina in, one that allows her not only to help her stepmother set aside "a little treasure of her own"[87] by selling embroidered black velvet caps meant for Khoja girls, but also to experience a deeply embodied form of aesthetic bliss (or *rass*[88]) that sustains her through the many hardships of her married life.

It is significant that Sakina's gradual acquaintance with Maasai bead art through mentoring by her husband's shop assistant Ole Lekakeny does not detract from her earlier apprenticeship in Khoja zari needlework, as one experience feeds on, even merges with, the other. Plagued as she is by her mother-in-law's incessant demands, Sakina turns to the elderly Maasai shop assistant to "rediscover her aesthetic inner self,"[89] one that escapes the person shaped by "how she is viewed," that is, by the expectations placed on her as wife, daughter-in-law, and "expectant carrier of [her husband's] family name and honour."[90] Suggestively, Sakina comes to see the "two hours on the veranda of the shop" that she spends on a daily basis with Ole Lekakeny as the only thing that still "tells her who [she] [is]" after her arranged marriage and her relocation from Nairobi to Nairowua. As Ole Lekakeny shows Sakina how to compose a Maasai bead pattern called keri and teaches her the colours of the emankeeki, the protagonist offers a deeply embodied and sensorial account of her experience:

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[84] *Bead Bai*, 213.
[85] *Bead Bai*, 213.
[86] *Bead Bai*, 212.
[87] *Bead Bai*, 207.
[88] Sultan Somjee uses "rass" throughout *Bead Bai* to define "the essence of temperament, mood or disposition of aesthetic bliss in a performance such as dance, song, music, ritual, drama or visual art. Rass is the pitch of artistic mood and pleasure. It is considered to be an emotive internal expression be it love, beauty or devotional pitch" (446). As defined by her stepmother Ma Gor Bai, rass "is a voice inside you that calls you to the moment of timelessness, when you have no thought or memory" (130). Interestingly, a moment of Swahili/'Indian' cross-cultural ecstacy is also evidenced in *Bead Bai*, in which Sakina's Swahili maid "follows Sakina's stitches" as she performs zari needlework and stands "mesmerized by the rythmic in-out movements of the zari strand." Sakina thus looks into Hawa's eyes and comes to "understand the bliss of rass in her." She adds, "that is her nafsi, her being in Swahili. That is my nafsi, my being" (208).
[89] Mala Pandurang, "Imaginings of Khoja, Maasai and Swahili Aesthetics," 11.
[90] *Bead Bai*, 315.

> The hand's knowledge of beadwork is different from embroidery, yet there is a common feeling in the eye with zariwork. I feel the pulsations in this patterned bead art as I do in the silver thread of zari, but I cannot shape them in words. […] My fingers move with the throb of my heart. They are the silent hums in unison vibrations, as if they were the raga of colours. The sensation is bodily, a divinity that grows in the heart not said in words[91]

In this passage, Somjee suggests that Sakina's embodied translation of one 'Indian' art form into an African ethnic art form – specifically a Maasai art form – testifies to the possibility of evolving a cross-cultural Afrasian sensibility, or imaginary. Material culture is of specific interest to Somjee, who is an ethnographer by training and made a plea, in an article entitled "Oral Traditions and Material Culture: An East Africa Experience", for a methodological approach taking on board the ways in which material culture and storytelling are inextricably intertwined in East Africa. In *Bead Bai*, too, there is a clear sense that, while the knowledge of the senses and that of the body always stand a little bit ahead of words and language, they are also intertwined with, and inseparable from, proverbs, songs, and narratives. To return to the above passage, if the "common feeling in the eye" that Sakina senses when she compares Maasai and Indian art forms foregrounds the role of the senses in creating Afrasian entanglements, it also carries the possibility of building bridges between the visual and the oral, so that material culture comes to "mediate the spoken word,"[92] in Somjee's own words. As he teaches the protagonist how to compose a Maasai bead pattern, Ole Lekakeny simultaneously shares the "story of origin of man and colours" that his grandmother Koko told him when he was a child – one through which he could "hear her [grandmother's] heart, not her words," and one that is now triggered, contained and expressed by bead art in the moment of passing it on to Sakina:

> We know our mountains and rocks by their colours, and we know the kinship of the cows, the zebra, the leopard, and all the animals of the savannah, with man, by the patterns of light and shadow on them. We know God by the colours of his body. […] We are descendants from one homestead of the pattern keri of the rock of Mt Kenya. […] We are the colours of light and darkness, of rain and drought. We are the colours of the emankeeki, the necklace.[93]

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[91] *Bead Bai*, 343.
[92] Sultan Somjee, "Oral Traditions and Material Culture: An East Africa Experience," *Research in African Literatures* 31.4 (Winter 2000) : 98.
[93] *Bead Bai*, 320.

As mediated by Ole Lekakeny, there is then an Afrasian confluence created through Sakina's prior acquaintance with "the hand's knowledge" inherent in zari needlework, the visual knowledge intrinsic to Maasai bead art, and the stories that accompany these two embodied forms of knowledge. This is reminiscent of what happened with Dadabapa, as he would teach Sakina to trace Gujarati alphabets while singing the sacred songs of the Satpanth Ismailis, which later causes Sakina to condense "the hand's knowledge" of calligraphy and the "music of syllables"[94] of her grandfather's *ginans* into the experience of zari needlework, "implant[ing] Gujarati sounds in a stitch."[95] The implication is that, possibly, Dadabapa somewhat prepared her granddaughter to evolve a multifaceted sensibility that would come to find its expression not only in Indian, but also in African patterned arts. It is thus unsurprising that Somjee suggests commonalities between the 'Indian' experience of rass – which is defined by Ma Gor Bai as a sensation of freedom when "all your senses meet at the tip of delight"[96] – and the Maasai experience of *e'sikar*, which Ole Lekekany presents as having the potential to generate a feeling of freedom due to the recognition of "beauty in its splendour."[97] As Sakina is finally given her own emankeeki by her Maasai friends Kini and Ntinti towards the close of the book, she "press[es] the emankeeki to her ears to hear the language of colours of the land" and comes to the cross-cultural realization that "E'sikar […] is like that. Like *rass* in Gujarati."[98]

In her reading of *Bead Bai*, Mala Pandurang aptly points out that, even if Somjee's book features moments of cross-cultural exchange where the norms of social segregation and the "operative contact"[99] between Asians and Africans in colonial Kenya get subverted and/or complicated, it remains that Sakina is in fact "presented as the *sole* Asian participant in the creation of an aesthetic interplay that is Asian-African."[100] More generally, Evan Mwangi and Tina Steiner remark that "there is great danger in romanticising Indian Ocean relations, especially given that some of the asymmetrical encounters between Africans and other cultures involve enslavement and imperialism"[101] – all of which suggests that representations of Afrasian entanglements should not keep out of sight the bigger picture of power relations

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[94] *Bead Bai*, 131.
[95] *Bead Bai*, 376.
[96] *Bead Bai*, 367.
[97] *Bead Bai*, 366.
[98] *Bead Bai*, 367, emphasis in original.
[99] Mala Pandurang, "Imaginings of Khoja, Maasai and Swahili Aesthetics," 13.
[100] Mala Pandurang, "Imaginings of Khoja, Maasai and Swahili Aesthetics," 12.
[101] Evan Mwangi and Tina Steiner, "Introduction: Indian OceanTrajectories," *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 4.3/4 (2018), 162.

between the Asian and African communities in colonial East Africa, specifically the relatively privileged colonial positioning of Asians in relation to African natives. And yet, Godwin Siundu also has a point when, in his readings of biographies authored by Kenyan Asian women writers, he contends that "the current image of Indians as a community insular to other Kenyans arises partly out of the pre-eminence of political over social histories of the community,"[102] making it clear that an overemphasis on political issues may also generate critical blind spots.

It would thus be fair to say that engaging with issues of Afrasian entanglements boils down to a balancing act where political and social approaches might be mutually fruitful and yet also might help keeping one another in check. But there is more to it than just that. Siundu adds that a crucial element in nonfiction texts by post-2000 Kenyan Asian women writers about key historical (male) Kenyan Asian figures is not so much to strike a claim of belonging to Africanness but, more importantly, to lay bare "the internal tension, personal contests, and divisions that in many instances made speaking in unison against colonial oppression difficult."[103] It is my contention that Somjee's text also participates in capturing the tensions within the Khoja community of East Africa, notably by bringing gender into the equation. Sakina may evolve an Afrasian sensibility through art and via her interactions with Maasai characters; it remains that the culmination of her friendship with Ole Lekakeny and with Kini and Ntinti – the creation of her own emankeeki – is framed by communal gender role prescriptions relayed by her mother-in-law, who reinscribes colonial hierarchies by deeming it unbecoming for a member of her family to wear "fake beads."[104] Very symbolically, Sakina cannot wear her emankeeki and has to keep it in her "dowry suitcase under [her] bed."[105] Yet, as she prepares to leave behind her husband's oppressive family to travel back with her newborn to her hometown so she can recover from post-partum depression, she imagines herself "watch[ing] the orange halo of the setting sun over the distant shadow of the Ngong Hills of Nairobi." In a moment merging past and present, the inner and outer words, and her own birth with the death of Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, she anticipates thinking back to the unsung Kikuyu heroine and her orphaned daughter Njoki from the vantage point of her hometown: "Some will call the sunrise Akyni, the beauty of dawn. Others will say it's Njoki, because the day is born again. They would say Njoki was the daughter of Mary Muthoni

[102] Godwin Siundu, "Beyond Auto/Biography: Power, Politics, and Gender in Kenyan Asian Women's Writings," *Research in African Literatures* 42.3 (Fall 2011), 122.
[103] Godwin Siundu, "Beyond Auto/Biography," 122.
[104] *Bead Bai*, 347.
[105] *Bead Bai*, 370.

Nyanjiru who hurled a rock at the mighty Empire and Akyni, a new dawn, broke over Kenya when I was born."[106]

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[106] *Bead Bai*, 442.

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