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Gendered Identity at the Interstices of Art, Trade and Domesticity: A Socio-literary Analysis of Sultan Somjee's *Bead Bai*

Abstract

This paper offers a gendered reading of Sultan Somjee's first novel *Bead Bai* (2012). Somjee brings to the fore the experiences of a relatively unknown community of Satpanth Khoja women in Kenya known as *Bead Bais*. These women were actively engaged in the barter trade between Asian dukawallahs and the indigenous African population. The paper examines how Somjee reconstructs the unique cross-cultural exchange between the two communities, which has not been explored sufficiently in the context of the East African Asian narratives. Somjee's main protagonist Sakina participates in the bead trade. Somjee interweaves Sakina's personal narrative with the larger narrative of the history of Asians in East Africa. Sakina's skill at both traditional zari embroidery and Maasai beadwork becomes symbolic of the synthesis of African and Indian influences. The novel also draws our attention to the plight of marginalized women within the community like widows, and prostitutes. Somjee's text is therefore read as an important tangential source to capture the finer nuances of gendered individual and collective mobility.

Keywords: Gendered reading, East African Asian Diaspora, Satpanth Khojas, Bead Bais, Maasai aesthetics.

This paper attempts to offer a gendered reading of the experience of a specific community of women, from within the East African Asian Diaspora. The history of trade between the East Coast of Africa, and the Indian subcontinent dates back centuries. It is at the turn of the 19th century, however, that trading communities from Western India begin to play an indispensable role in the expansion of British imperialist and commercial interests. Gisbert Oonk (2013) in his detailed study of the Asian business community in the region suggests that the study of the East African Asian diaspora as a settler community can be divided into three temporal periods. First, the early years of settlement from the late 19th century, leading up to the 1930s. The decades of the 1930s and 1940s was considered a 'golden age' for the community. However with the 1950s came the rise of African nationalism and strong anti-Asian sentiments which followed. In due time, certain characteristics came to be identified

with this particular diaspora. Within the colonial pyramidal structure, class and racial divisions were institutionalized. Europeans occupied the top positions, the Asians were the mercantile middlemen, and black Africans were confined to the role of labourers and peasants. Primarily a trading community, the dukawallahs who were referred to as the Jews of Africa, associated with economic exploitation and were perceived to be non-assimilative. However, the fascinating history of its early pioneering ventures, as well as the contribution of the community in terms of its entrepreneurial spirit remained marginalized.

Unlike in the case of migrations from the Indian subcontinent to South Africa and Mauritius, women arrived in East Africa mainly as ‘adjunct’ wives of male migrants. There are very few official documents to record their arrival, and the mention of personal details of these women and their fascinating experiences remain excluded from the footnotes of history. One therefore has to fall back on alternate sources to reconstruct the subaltern experiences of these women migrants, whose life-narratives have been subsumed within the larger collective history of their husbands or fathers. It is here that creative reconstructions can be used as an important tangential source to capture the finer nuances of gendered individual and collective mobility. This in turn allows for a deeper insight into processes of the formation of diasporic gendered subjectivities in the context of the East African Asian diaspora.

Literatures of the experiences of Asians in East Africa by and large are relatively unknown, in terms of the larger body of writing under the rubric of the Indian Diaspora. Those who have received critical attention are mainly male writers like Kenyan-born/ Tanzanian-raised M. G. Vassanji, Uganda-born Peter Nazareth, and Bahadur Tejani. In recent years however, there is an emerging body of writing by women writers which offers perspectives on the experiences of women across generations from within the community. These writers include Parita Mukta, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Neera Kapur-Dromson and Shailja Patel, amongst others. While these writers challenge the gendered roles of women in the diaspora, their narratives primarily focus on migrant women as wives and mothers within the space of the domestic.

Sultan Somjee’s first novel *Bead Bai* (2012) is however different in that it offers an engaging insight into the experiences of a unique group of women of the Satpanth Khoja community in Kenya, who were actively engaged with the barter of goods. Somjee credits these women with enabling the flow of beads between the ‘dukawallahs’ or petty traders, and the ethnic tribes in the early days of trade. They therefore came to be known as ‘bead bais’. Their contact with the indigenous population led to a unique cross-cultural exchange between the two communities which has not been explored sufficiently in the context of creative writing from the East African Asian diaspora. *Bead Bai* presents how a cultural synthesis of Asian and African art forms evolves out of the bonding that takes place between a young Satpanth woman called Sakina, and her indigenous Maasai mentor Ole Lekakeny. The *emankeeki* which is a circular beaded neck-to-chest decorate that Maasai married women wear becomes a central trope in this self-education. Lekakeny teaches Sakina how to design an *emankeeki* which “displays meticulously worked out patterns according to Maasai aesthetic schemes that relate to patterns in nature such as of clouds, animal coats, trees, rocks and mountains” (Somjeev). He explains how “the vast Maasai geography is itself known by colours as are their stories, personalities of God and their

much loved cattle” (Somjeev) . It is evident from Somjee’s preface that this work of fiction has germinated from his personal observations as an ethnographer; his close interest in the oral tales of the community; and photo albums of the past. His interpretation of the “art imagery” that he incorporates is “prompted by the rhythm of Satpanth Ismaili and Maasai folklore ” (Somjee vi – vii) .

The Satpanth Ismailis , also referred to as the Satpanth Khojas , are one among “ the larger ethnically and regionally scattered communities of Ismailis whose homelands stretch from the Middle East to China” (Somjee ii) . The Satpanth faith originated in Saurashtra in India and what makes the sub-sect unique is that its worshippers embrace the Vedantic teachings as well as the messages of Moslem pirs (Somjee i) . The early entrepreneurs of this unique religious group soon developed a network of family stores that spanned across the geography of East Africa. As Somjee describes:

.... in time, Satpanth Ismaili family stores spanned the African geography – the forests, grasslands, highlands, the Great Rift Valley, plateau and deserts. Often their home store was on the only street and they were the only Asian African family in the area. Later when more families arrived they built a communal jamatkhana that would be the fulcrum of their social life .(Somjee ii)

The petty traders set off for the interior areas, from the East Coast of Africa to the Congo region, with foot caravans, carrying goods for barter such as blankets, cloth, food stuff and building material. Somjee describes the community’s fascinating involvement in the trade of beads of “different colours, luster, sizes and shapes” with ethnic tribes (Somjee iii) . These entrepreneurial merchants understood the preferences of the ethnic groups for the beads for purpose of making cultural artifacts and accordingly made available a wide variety of beads, which in turn “heightened diverse vernacular expressions of body decor in patterns and colours” (Somjee v). Somjee gives the instance of RajanLalji , a Khoja trader who ran a flourishing bead business in Nairobi “supplying the stock to the rural bead merchants along routes and the new railroad into the interior”(Somjee iv) as early as 1905. Other legendary known names of early Satpanth Ismaili merchants include that of Sewa Haji Paroo who was popularly referred to as the ‘Merchant King of the Coast’ and Allidina Visram. Kenyan-Indian writer Neera Kapur- Dromson also describes how beads were used in the barter trade before monetization crept in *From Jhelum to Tana* (2007). She points out that it was not only the Maasai but the Samburu (a tribe closely related to the Maasai) who also valued coloured beads in exchange for grain. One could count at least 400 varieties of beads and the Samburu men would thread the beads onto the best palm fibre and use them as body decoration(49) . These beads were imported from Persia, China and in later days from Venice, Amsterdam and Czechoslovakia (Dromson 49) . Similarly, in *Dancing with Destiny* (2014), Urmila Jhaveri describes the arrival of her grandfather Kanji JirajManek in Dar-es-Salaam from Jamjodhpur in Gujarat by dhow in 1870, with the dream “to make Rs.25 and return back in his village, a rich man”(54) . Her grandfather started his first job with JiwanHirji at a salary of “Khavu, pivu and savu - food, water and sleeping space and one set of new clothes on Diwali”(Jhaveri 54) . One of his assigned tasks at the trader’s shop where he was employed was to make ‘ushangamalas’ or multicoloured bead chains and necklaces which were very popular items of adornment. His neck pieces sold well and he soon saved enough money to start his own duka. In due time, he set up a wholesale

business in the name of Kanji Jeraj& Company in Dar and opened a branch in Lindi(Jhaveri 54) .

By the early twentieth century, several Satpanth women had begun to arrive on the East African shore as child brides, and adapted to their new lives in both urban areas as well as rural areas. Often, the merchant's wife, mother and daughter would work at the family store, handling the bead stocks, mainly imported from Czechoslovakia. Somjee shares that between 1920 and 1950, two women Chak Bai and Puri Bai came to be known as the ' Khoja Bead Bais' of Nairobi. In due time, an entire street in commercial Nairobi came to be known as 'Moti' (Bead) Bazaar or Khoja Bazaar because SatpanthIsmailis were also known as Khojas(Somjee iv). Two of their contemporaries were Santok Bai at Ngong Town in Kenya, and Jethi Bai in Arusha, Tanganyika (Somjee iv) .With specific reference to life in the rural areas, Somjee points out that while the bead merchant's family may have lived apart from the pastoral Maasai tribe around them, there was the inevitable interaction and communication that took place during the sale of beads. As a result of contact with the Maasai, the Bead Bais would bring into their homes " ethnic African words and expressions, foods, stories, geography and both utility material culture and artefacts of beauty" (Somjee vi).While many of these women spoke no English or Swahili, they soon began to speak the language of the local tribes. They came to partake in "indigenous herbal medicine and spirit mediums for physical and mental cures" and even consulted " ethnic spiritual practitioners called *waganga* for both aversion and infliction of evil" (Somjee vi).Somjee explains that "such practices were not wholly alien to the Satpanth Ismailis' own beliefs in spirits and traditional knowledge" (Somjee vi - vii) .Somjee dedicates his book to the elderly Bead Bais of the community , the majority of whom have migrated to the 'new land' of Canada, and whose stories remain largely unheard to the world outside the Satpanth community.

The novel's main protagonist Sakina is born on 15th March 1922 in Nairobi, in the British East African colony of Kenya. Historically it is an important date because it is the day of the Kiiipande massacre when " soldiers fires crowd protesting against the imprisonment of Harry Thuku", Kenya's first African nationalist leader (Somjee 4) . Sakina's life thus becomes entwined with the larger historical narrative of the land. She is described as the first grandchild of the Khoja migrant, "a native-born British colonial subject who would learn to speak late " (Somjee 10) . Sakina's family lives on the street called Jugu Bazaar, where Indian merchants would spread out " cloth, spices and beads in voluminous displays of variety. Here would sit Indian women in circles grinding rice, mung, millet and sorghum on stone hand mills" (Somjee 5) . The writing in Gujarati script on the book cover (transliteration - *Khotamotinasachawepari*) - "Of imitation pearls, we are the genuine merchants"(Somjee7) -is what is visible beneath the sign of her grandfather Dadabapa's store. The shantytown bazaar where the family lives is part of the already racially compartmentalized Nairobi, and the first section of the novel effectively captures "the sounds and smells of oriental Nairobi" of the 1920s and 30s (Somjee 7) . Initially, a room would be built behind the store which would be used as the trader's home. The home-store would have another room furnished as a jamatkhana or the prayer house. In the later years, as more families arrived, a communal jamatkhana evolved as a place of congregation and the centre point or " fulcrum of their social life". The men would meet there to meet to

exchange the latest in political news ranging from the British government policies on immigration from India, to news of the arrival of a Saurashtran lawyer from South Africa called Gandhi (Somjee 22) .

The novel's structure is one of stories within stories as Sakina recalls the captivating tales of her nationalist uncle Noordin, her step mother Ma Gor Bai, and most significantly her grandfather Dadabapa , “ who like all good storytellers, always had one more story to tell” of the old country that he fondly refers to as “Desh” (Somjee 128) . Dadabapu's recollections of the trajectory of his arrival in East Africa, and the subsequent settlement of the family, offers an insight of a larger collective history at the intersection of the colonial destinies of the Khojas, white settlers and indigenous peoples. Sakina grows up listening to her grandfather's “ stories about Africa and India, and Indians in Africa and how they blended their African lives with Indian myths” (Somjee 25) . These stories held her emotions “together like patches stitched by events” (Somjee 33) . “ Let the story tell itself ”, her Dadabapa would say, “twisting and turning if makes itself to the end” (Somjee 33) . These stories are related in retrospect by Sakina who comments: “ I am taken back in years listening to their stories while telling my own. I live the past as if it were today when I tell you this story” (Somjee 128) . Sakina reflects on her structure of her own narrative :

Like the spangled kanga, the wild hen of savannah grasslands, my story nods its head up and down. You wonder what corner it will go to now. Where will it hide? Where will it come to rest? But kanga's head never stops bobbing. My tale meanders along the story path bouncing up and down like the kanga's head. When I was young, that's how stories were told. Like the bird called kanga criss-crossing paths of time, nodding at each step, drawing past to present and pushing back present to past. (Somjee 189)

Somjee interweaves Sakina's personal narrative with the larger narrative of Kenyan colonial history, and the rise of nationalist movement. For instance, one of Sakina's tasks is to serve tea to the men who would gather around to play cards, and talk about the railway line from Mombasa to Nairobi constructed by indentured labour from India between 1896 and 1900. The chapter entitled “ Stories that angered the land” offers a description of the early nationalist movement pointing out that the community was not entirely insensitive to the nationalist sentiments of black Africans. The anecdotes stir Sakina's imagination. Having heard of Kikuyu activist Mary Muthoni Myanjiru who had hurled a rock at the armed guards assembled at the Central Police Station on Kingsway (Somjee 20), and Ma Gor Bai's excited reaction at the incident- (“ A woman wanting to wear a man's trousers/ Throwing stones at the English? What did she want? Can a woman do that?”), Sakina reflects that while such questions “had no answers”, they still “left a number of thoughts in her head” (Somjee 21) . Dadabapa's family had been impoverished by “the great famine of Saurashtra called the Famine of Six” . In addition the burden of repeated colonial taxes compelled not only the Khojas but “ Jains, Patels, Bohras and Lohanas” to leave for Africa (Somjee 59) . Although Sakina has never seen India herself, she can understand the pull of the ‘desh’ on her grandfather's sentiments - “ How can one not return to live the old age and be buried where one was born? Such is the pull of hope”(Somjee 38) . She can also empathize with the trauma of leaving the homeland and wonders “ if it was not the pain of leaving India that stopped him now from returning. The pain that stays in you becoming fear of being hurt again” (Somjee

38). Her grandfather would often vary the order in which he recounted incidents in his life. Sometimes the details were repeated in mixed anecdotes gleaned during the trials of survival on the dhow to Africa, and then in Africa. She adds, “ Sometimes he spoke of his past as if it was today and now. I did not feel I belonged to his India of 1903 the way he did. I did not know the peanut trees, his Haripur his neem tree or the motherland of his childhood that he called Desh” (Somjee 71). Sakina’s step-mother also recollects how she travelled via a dhow from the quay in Bombay, to Zanzibar. Once on board, she had joined “ a woman's group, of which there were many, as many sitting separately as there were castes and religions on board the dhow” and stayed close to a group of Khoja women and brides (Somjee 82). Sakina can correlate the rites of passage of their journey across the ocean to her own rites of passage of growing up into a young woman. She comments, “ Thus, began the first great crossing of my family in the sensations of my body, sighs of my breath and sights in my imagination. The saga lived in me as I was growing up becoming a woman”(Somjee 89) .

Sakina does not attend the school where her younger sister Monghi and her cousin sister Malek study and she burns with envy at their good fortune when she sees them in their school-pinafore. Rather, her days are spent doing domestic chores, including running errands at her grandfather’s store NAGJI PADEMSI AND SONS more popularly known as ‘*Duka la UshanganaBlanketi, the Bead and Blanket Store*’. The shop is located on the legendary lane called Moti Bazaar (or Bead Bazaar), with panels of beads on display both inside and outside the Asian shops. Customers refer to Sakina’s stepmother Ma Gor Bai, who worked on beads every afternoon, as ‘Mama Ushanga’, or the ‘Bead Woman’. In the afternoon, as part of their domestic chores, Sakina, her younger sister Malek and cousin Monghi help Ma Gor Bai to sort out the beads that came in boxes according to their shapes and colours. Ma Gor Bai would guide them “bead string by bead string” to work on the display on the panels of the shops folding door in order to attract the local ethnic groups (Somjee 127). They would lay them out in clusters and strings on the floor, creating separate spaces for the Kikuyu and Maasai as “each group’s preferences for shapes, sizes, colours and hues were different from the other” (Somjee 211). They arrange the new stock of beads in different sizes of blue, whites and reds for the pastoral Maasai. They also make “ triangular newspaper packages of lusterless pink beads, all of the same size, so tiny that the hole in them allows just the slimmest sewing needle to go through for the ear *haangi* rings of the farming Kikuyu women “(Somjee 211-212). Sakina is captivated by the lives of the Kikuyu women, which is very unlike their own. She describes them as women “of great beauty in their freedom drawn from the country wide under an open sky” (213). She asks herself: “ Was Muthoni Nyanjiru not one of them, nurtured by the freedom of the open sky country? What made her, a woman, to throw a rock into the face of the mighty Empire?” (Somjee 213) On the other hand, women of her family are confined within the walls of the home-store-jamatkhana and confined within the shantytown of Nairobi. She compares the Asia women to the European nuns at the Catholic nun-house in Loreto Valley where priests grow coffee. The Indian carpenters and masons who fix their houses and churches bring descriptions of these women who live secluded in the convent.

Although she does not attend formal school, Sakina has learnt to write from Dadabapa and from Monghi and Malek (Somjee 129). Sakina is extremely talented in the skills of zari-thread embroidery which she has learnt from her stepmother Ma Gor Bai. She

compares the art of calligraphy or the movement of writing, to the graceful movement of the hand and needle while doing embroidery. Sakina desires to write like her grandfather “whose handwriting, people say, dances like a string of singing pearls on paper”. And adds that “each sound silhouette on the slate echoes the music of the stitch of my floral embroidery and a line in the divine song”(Somjee 130-131) . Embroidery therefore becomes a trope for intense and independent artistic expression. The intricate stitches of traditional zari embroidery transport her into “a paradise of her imagination” creating a private language wherein each stitch “has a little sound in it like a Gujarati letter sketched in Dadabapa’s book of Satpanth verse”(Somjee 205) . Ma Gorbhai is extremely sensitive to Sakina’s passionate involvement with the art. “Sakina is married to zari. She is happiest singing in the shine gardens she creates. The child loses herself in the paradise of her imagination,” Stepmother Gor Bai tells visitors to their home(Somjee 205) . “Reading is like embroidery”, she shares with Sakina, “ It is the raga wrapping the verse of guru-pir that awakens you.” And yet she also cautions Sakina that “Good girls do not show the rassa inside. Rassa is a voice inside that calls you to the moment of timelessness, when you have no thought or memory.” As Somjee explains in the glossary of key words and their cultural contexts , “rassa” “is the pitch of artistic mood and pleasure”(Somjee 439) . As Sakina embroiders, a “rassa of ecstasy” embodies her (Somjee 204). The act of embroidery serves multiple functions. She learns how to embroider black velvet Khoja girls’ caps that they sell and hence it becomes a means of earning income, albeit used for their own dowries (Somjee 203). Over time it also allows insights into the lives of women in her community, derived from their private “ memories of embroidered dresses, pachedis, saris and shawls like the bandhani” (Somjee 206) .

Sakina’s creativity becomes symbolic of the synthesis of African and Indian influences. While she has learnt the skill of traditional zari embroidery from Gor Bhai, she has closely observed Bakari, their Swahili watchman who would hum the *kasida* hymn tune every morning as his coarse fingers would ‘translate the song’ into “a supple cotton kofia cap in silk thread”(Somjee 134) . Sakina reflects:

The movements of the watchman’s fingertips marking the rhythm in the *kasida*’s music captivate me; his voice rises up and down and pauses between; his fingers go up and down, filling in a line and leaving out a space between the lines ... I hear the beauty and then the elation. How his voice and finger tips work one into the other, the song into the art. (Somjee 134)

Bakari explains that what he sings is the ‘ Swahili Ibadī prayer’ –“the art of my forefathers carried from the old country on the Arabian Sea that opens its arms to the Indian Ocean washing the African continent ” (Somjee 134) .

When Sakina reaches puberty, she becomes increasingly conscious of the restrictions placed upon her in terms of what she should wear, where she can visit and with whom she can be seen talking. She reflects “ at times my mind of a girl turning thirteen was in turmoil. My freedom was suddenly limited. My body was changing rapidly and I had no control over it” (Somjee 74) . The religious classes that she attends stresses upon the notion of family honour and Sakina learns that the price of keeping family honour is not easy –“Family shame is family pain shared”(Somjee 168) is a recurrent motif and the six women in the household, including Sakina and her sisters, were constantly reminded of their duty “ to protect our

family honour, our faith and our duties to men, and not let a word slip out to the neighbours. Otherwise, the shaming will spread like the savannah fire when the land is dry, the sky is hot blue and the grass is crisp”(Somjee 149). And then as Ma Gor Bai would say, “Who will marry you?” (Somjee 149). The concept of family honour, associated with the concept of a dependent woman or a ‘mothaj’ who is a burden on her family and community, is central to the text. Sakina’s father insists that her marriage takes place worrying that she will be ‘a mothaj’ if she is not married off soon. As a teenager, Sakina is already drawn to the ideology of marriage and motherhood. She has been strongly influenced by Bollywood films at the ‘Ladies Only matinee show at Film India’ (Somjee 244) which promote romantic associations of marriage, and makes Sakina conscious of her emerging sexuality:

I want to be married. I want a husband. I want to be a mother. I want to be a woman. My story drifts into my dreams of my own home. It flows into the silence of the night’s pulsating stars in my eyes expectant of a new day, a new life. My awakened body throbs with a desire to be loved by a man. Loved like Suraiya on Film India screen. Loved like them at Meethi Bai’s lodge.(Somjee 219)

Sakina is positively influenced by her independent minded stepmother, Ma Gor Bai who has lived as an outcaste Satpanth widow in Zanzibar before her marriage to Sakina’s father, a much older man. At the age of sixteen, Gor Bai set sail from the port of Diu in search of a husband who had not returned from Africa. Determined to defy her destiny as an unwanted ‘polluted’ widow, and to avoid the scorn directed towards them as “mothaj” by reluctant well-wishers, she stays back in Zanzibar. Africa, therefore, became “the land of the second chance” for such ostracized women. She arrives to discover that her husband Vali Premji had remarried and had had three children by his Swahili wife. Interestingly, he is said to have lived next to the house where Gandhiji “in his folly of youth, could not say no to the invitation of the white captain of the Bombay-Durban line and visited a Zanzibari dame”(Somjee 2018). She decides not to return to the village of Superi because the dishonor of a broken marriage would also bring shame to her family. She is determined to defy social norms which would compel her as a widow to enter an ashram. For her, Africa becomes “the land of the second chance” (Somjee 208). In Zanzibar, Gor Bai lives with those widows, and other women with their children, who had not heard from their husbands who had joined foot safaris into the interior to look for work. The women earned their livelihood of just one meal a day by cooking meals for bachelors. This meagre income saves them from ignominy of being called ‘mothaj’ or a woman who is dependent on reluctant well-wishers for alms. Gor Bai becomes part of the Welfare Cooking Committee and teaches the other women new recipes. She is however still stigmatized as ‘an absakan’/ a ‘cursed and childless woman.’ She then starts to draw from the traditional art of zari embroidery which she had learnt from her grandmother, and “she from her mother, who was widowed at twenty one, and made a living from zari embroidery on the Satpanth, bandhani while she sang the sacred verses to calm her insider” (Somjee 209) She earns an income from the sale of embroidered velvet caps, pillows and dresses. Ironically, the community that has ostracized her as “the polluted one, the unfortunate absakan”, now values her embroidery. She conveys her pain through her art – “My art is my verse; a cry of longing to be free. The pain I put to art is nature’s gift to the artist” (Somjee 209). Her marriage to Sakina’s father is arranged by Kheroon Bai, a wealthy lady

and the only daughter of a clove and slave merchant in Zanzibar who would seek out mistreated and shamed absakan widows in the divided jamat of the old port town. Kheroon Bai arranges re-marriages of widows, which she justified as being the ‘Saheb’s’ (religious leader of the Ismaili) wish. Gorbai shares her eternal indebtedness with Sakina: “She taught me courage and how to live in troubled times” (Somjee 209-210)

Somjee also draws our attention to the historically verified presence of Indian prostitutes in Africa, through his sympathetic portrayal of Meethi Bai, the proprietor of ‘Indian lodge’ which is a brothel frequented by labourers brought in to construct the Ugandan Railway. Meethi Bai’s lodge becomes a second home to the ‘three Bombay ladies’ who escape from a ‘kothas’ in Mumbai, in search for a better life. Dadabapa disapproves of Ma Gorbai’s close friendship with Meethi Bai of the lodge, suggesting that it brings disgrace to their home – it “brings shame of sharam to me in the jamatkhana” (Somjee 179). Ma Gor Bai friendship with Meethi Bai stems from a shared past of pain, humiliation and determination (Somjee 229). Gor Bai is determined to bring the dancing girls from the lodge to sing at Sakina’s henna night and declares: “I want Nairobi’s nightingale to celebrate the Satpanthbandhani. That will choke throat bazaar’s gossip in the throat” (Somjee 226). “I will send a message to Devdasi Rupa Bai to come and be your accompaniment. She is an old grandmother but her voice is young like a girl’s. My story is a song” (Somjee 227).

At sixteen, Sakina is married to Haiderali Devji, who is just two years older than her. He is the grandson of Devji Momna, Dadabapu’s friend in Zanzibar, with whom he undertook the perilous first voyage together, and had promised his first granddaughter in marriage when they met again after many years (Somjee 216). Sakina’s in-laws live in Nairowua, which is a day’s drive away from Nairobi. For the first time in her life, Sakina ventures beyond the parameters of the segregated Asian section of the city. On their journey out of Nairobi, her sexually ‘experienced’ eighteen year husband imposes himself on her with the least of sensitivity, thus crushing the romantic illusion of marriage that Sakina had nurtured as an impressionable sixteen year old. The narrative emphasizes the lack of agency of the Satpanth bride. The young Sakina finds her marriage to be oppressive, particularly because of her dominating mother-in-law who imposes one domestic chore after the other. The only comfort she can find is in the two hours every afternoon that she spends on the veranda of the family store, where she learns how to work with beads from the Maasai elder Ole Lekakeny. Lekakeny inspires her: “You will learn how to bead the bead in your fingers and let the colours sing to your eyes. You will know the Maasai art when you start beading the sky” (Somjee 293). It is through Lekakeny (‘the storyteller of the Savannah’, 310) that Sakina is initiated into the mythology and legends of the Maasai. Lekakeny tutors her on the intricate bead patterns of the *emankeeki* and Sakina soon begins to work on her own *emankeeki*. As the magic of the colours and patterns of beads take over, Sakina experiences her personal moment of ‘E’sika’r’ which in Maasai can mean “joy, freedom or splendor. It can also mean adornment. All meanings imply delight as from beauty” (Somjee 436). Thus Sakina begins to evolve her personal language by blending both Khoja and Maasai aesthetics.

In the immediate post-war years, a wide spread cattle plague breaks out wiping out half of the Maasai’s cattle. In turn, this effects the trade in beads which begins to fall drastically. For the purpose of financial survival, Haiderali buys a Singer sewing machine and Sakina

begins to machine-embroider bridal sari and frocks for richer Khoja families. The family now depends on her earnings for survival. Sakina however grows increasingly frustrated at the monotonous task of recreating machine-made modern designs. She misses the inner rhythm of hand embroidery and the cultural syncretism between Khoja, Swahili and Maasai art forms that had allowed her to evolve the private means of expressing her inner being. The novel ends with Sakina as a young mother who has just given birth to a baby boy. Articulating resistance, she demands that Ma Gor Bai should be present for the birthing process of her son, despite her mother-in-law's protests that she is an 'unclean widow', and also insists that the baby is circumcised in a hospital and not at home as was the traditional practice. Exhausted from childbirth and suffering post-partum depression, she struggles with stifling of her creative expression, as well as the oppressive atmosphere of the household. In a state of delirium, she envisions Ole Lekakeny by her bedside, offering his healing powers and when Sakina recovers from the fever, the inner voice that she has hitherto ignored begins to speak. The novel ends with her taking a journey back to Nairobi with Ma Gor Bai, to reconnect with the women of her childhood.

Somjee's novel is thus significant in that it reminds us of the heterogeneity of gendered experiences within the East African Asian diaspora. On the one hand, it deftly presents a patriarchal social milieu wherein the ideology of wifedom/motherhood is a dominant factor in defining the Satpanth woman's self-identity. The prime institution of Sakina's confinement is the home as the focal point not only of female reproduction but also of domestic labour. Somjee however goes beyond the confines of the domestic space of the Satpanth home to explore how this personal space is enriched by Sakina's contact with the Maasai spiritual aesthetics, as an extension of the labour demanded by her family's small time business. Art not only becomes her means of connecting to the indigenous, feminine heritage of the land and of synthesizing her multiple Asian and African heritages (Somjee 256-257), but also of self-realization and the will to assert agency, however limited. This creates an interstitial or in-between space at an emotional, aesthetic and intellectual level. Dan Owang points out that "the domestic realm is one of the most fraught themes in narratives of the "contact zones" between Indian and black East Africans (4). Somjee takes up this very realm and demonstrates how, on the rare occasions when inter-ethnic contact was permitted, it created an 'in-between spaces' which allowed for a transformation of Sakina's sense of self-identity. This in turn propels her towards strategies of resistance which become the first crucial step towards challenging of a fundamental patriarchal social-cultural system.

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