



University of Mumbai



International Interdisciplinary Diaspora Lecture Series
EXPLORING THE AESTHETICS OF AN ASIAN-AFRICAN HERITAGE
THROUGH THE WORK OF SULTAN SOMJEE
By Professor Mala Pandurang on 18 September 2020

The CoHaB Indian Diaspora Centre (CoHaB IDC), University of Mumbai, had organized a lecture on 'Exploring the Aesthetics of an Asian-African Heritage through the Work of Sultan Somjee' under its international interdisciplinary Diaspora Lecture Series on 18th September 2020. The lecture was organized jointly with Dr. BMN College of Home Science (Autonomous), SNDT University, and the H. R. College of Commerce & Economics.

Professor Mala Pandurang, Principal, Dr. BMN College of Home Science, delivered the lecture through a webcast that was attended by participants from India and the World.

Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha, Director, CoHaB IDC, welcomed all the participants and introduced Professor Mala Pandurang. She also mentioned that CoHaB IDC had collaborated on this particular lecture with Dr. BMN College of Home Science and the H. R. College of Commerce & Economics.



Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha, Director, CoHaB IDC

Professor Mala Pandurang began her lecture by giving a brief overview of how she derived at the topic from an earlier UGC-funded project, 'Wives, Mothers and Others,' a socio-literary investigation she undertook into the lives of early women migrants to East Africa. From the mid-19th century, Indian labourers have been transported in huge numbers to East Africa from former European colonies to work in plantations as indentured labour, also known as the Kala Paani phenomenon.



Professor Mala Pandurang, Principal, Dr. BMN College of Home Science (Autonomous)

Not just labourers but many others, mostly traders from the Western regions of Gujarat and Saurashtra, too migrated to East Africa in search of new opportunities. These traders were free passengers with more economic stability and freedom of mobility. Thus, in their trips to and from their mother country helped retain ties with the mother culture. These traders followed the railway line that was being constructed from Mombasa to Nairobi. It was used by the British to open up the interiors of East Africa where the traders opened trading posts and the colonial administrators followed by setting up colonial posts.

Over time, as traders married women from their homeland, these migrants established migration networks, similar to the ones that were set up in the US in the latter half of the 19th century. However, the history of these migrant women was subsumed within the larger, collective history and very few documented records are available to capture this.

It was in her quest to reconstruct these elided subaltern experiences that Professor Mala came across the work of Kenyan born ethnographer Sultan Somjee. Somjee who has curated an exhibition on Asian African heritage in Nairobi and has published a handbook, *Stories from things: write your own memoir in 10 days*. The speaker focussed on Somjee's two ethnographic historical narratives - *Bead Bai* (2012) and *Home Between Crossings* (2016). Somjee's narrative offers a rare gender perspective in which he weaves minute details of the daily domestic lives of the first and second generation Khoja community, especially the multi-generational, transactional lives of Ismaili Khoja women in colonial and postcolonial Kenya. His narratives also remind us that the composition of the community of Asian women in East Africa was not homogenous but was demarcated by internal and external religious, caste and class boundaries.

The two narratives cover a timespan ranging from the early years of settlement, ending with the traumatic dislocation of the central protagonist from Kenya to Canada. Somjee talks about some of the first few traders who arrived in East Africa from India like Allidini Visram and Haji Paroo. Khoja women had begun to arrive in East Africa by the early 20th century, mainly as child brides. These women maintained family and religious community values and networks that formed the basis of economic, social and cultural capital of their household in a community that was inherently patriarchal.

In recent years, the lives of male entrepreneurs have been reconstructed, but Somjee, through his work, has reinserted the marginalised life of women in the history of the commerce of the community. Somjee presents the imaginative space that has been unexplored until now. He draws from the interface of art and ideas from his own childhood experiences at his uncle's shop in Maasai land, his Khoja and Swahili heritage, and his extensive fieldwork as an ethnographer among the ethnic people of Kenya.

The material artefacts of beads are central to the narrative of *Bead Bai*. He traces back how the Indian merchants traded in beads with the indigenous tribes of East Africa. By 1905, Khoja merchant Rajan Lalji had established a wholesale business in beads and supplied them along the Mombasa - Nairobi railroad settlement of Dukawalas. Somjee's great grandfather who arrived from India in 1902 sold beads at the marketplace. In his personal interview with Professor Mala, Somjee mentioned how beads opened a huge dimensional visual culture. He mentioned how the Maasai had earlier worn ornaments made of natural objects like shells, seeds and metal which made them limited and scarce. In another interview, Somjee explained how he was inspired by young girls in the ages of 9 - 13 years arriving in Africa as child brides. In his words, "They became mothers and died as grandmothers." He encountered these grandmothers selling beads.

Somjee also uses the aesthetic art of embroidery as a trope, a means of offering an insight into the lives of the women of the community, who embroidered elaborate trousseaus for themselves and women of their community.

Somjee's *Bead Bai* thus reinserts into the East African history the forgotten and fascinating life of these women who came to be known as 'Bead Bais'. According to Somjee, beads opened up an entirely new dimension of a visual culture, thus enabling a unique interface between Asian women and the indigenous community which has been ignored/overlooked in the reconstruction of Asian community in East Africa. Professor Mala gave examples from the book through which one sees how Somjee creates a pluralistic space across gender and cultural divides through the multiple movements of interaction between the eyes, hands and songs while working with art.

Sultan Somjee discusses the two-facedness of the community and questions of race and integration and deals with the theme of racial prejudice in *Home Between Crossings*. In this book, the author used the trope of the Kanga cloth as a possible connection to deal with the dynamics of the African-Asian relationship. *Home Between Crossings* continues the story of Sakina, the protagonist in *Bead Bai*. The Kanga is a printed cloth which is almost always sold in a pair and has a printed proverbial inscription. For almost a century, the Kangas were designed and printed in India, apart from the Far East and Europe. Many symbols have roots in European, African and Indian Ocean cultures. Professor Mala gave the example of the Paisley which has been found across the three cultures. Somjee uses the material artefacts to become a storyteller.

Professor Mala mentioned how according to Rebecca Green, the Kanga functions as a complex mode of communication whereas Somjee describes it as a cloth that speaks wisdom. He uses the Kanga as the repository of Swahili oral history. Professor Mala cited examples from the book to illustrate this point.

The speaker concluded by summarising that she finds Somjee's work to be unique because of his focus on the artefacts of art, oral and visual, as a means of addressing the complexities of Asian-African race relationships. The lecture was followed by an interesting discussion during the Q&A session.

Dr. Paromita Chakraborty, Associate Professor and Head, Department of English & Director, Global Research Initiatives, HR College of Commerce and Economics, gave the formal vote of thanks. She thanked Professor Mala Pandurang for opening up new areas in Diaspora Studies for exploration and how one needs to study new areas in Diaspora Studies and look into different geographies instead of focussing only on the West.



Dr. Paromita Chakraborty, Associate Professor and Head, Department of English & Director, Global Research Initiatives, HR College of Commerce and Economics

The lecture was well appreciated by all the participants.

You may view the entire lecture here:

[**Diaspora Lecture Series: Exploring the Aesthetics of an Asian-African Heritage through the Work of Sultan Somjee by Professor Mala Pandurang on 18 September 2020**](#)

Date: 18 September 2020
Place: Mumbai

Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha
Director, CoHaB IDC
