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## **Tracking Fictive Depictions of Interracial Relationships between Diasporic Indian Women and African Men in East African Literature**

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In this paper, I explore what Stephanie Jones has called “this most taboo and threatening of sexual relationships” – that of an Indian woman and an East African man (185). The dearth of scholarship examining fictive depictions of this particular sexual and racial configuration in East African literature is quite remarkable.<sup>1</sup> This is a questionable silence in light of the recurrent portrayals of sexual encounters between Indian women and African men in the Anglophone literature of East Africa. These little-studied narratives are important because they compel us to rethink the colonial binaries that dominate the investigations of interracial relationships within the locus of British empire studies. These sexual encounters and/or relationships refuse the binary of Miranda and Caliban or that of the white imperialist and his beleaguered female employee.

For one of Yasmin Ladha’s protagonists in *Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories* (1992), the burgeoning sexuality of the Indian girl-woman in East Africa is always already embedded within the politics of the African nation-state as well as that of the domestic and public patriarchy:

In a booming voice, he screams at Juma, our houseboy, for not starching his shirt, and when he screams at President Nyerere, his voice breaks; he rasps, ‘Nyerere, I will kill you... I will rape your mother... you dog fucker,’ and Mum holds him, murmuring words like prayers. When Father has a bad dream, I am allowed to

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<sup>1</sup> See Stephanie Jones’s “The Politics of Love and History: Asian Women and African Men in East African Literature” in a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* devoted to the study of the Indian diaspora in Africa.

sleep with them. Once he screams so loudly, my stomach aches. In the morning, I have my period.” (23).

In this sliver of a memory, the onset of menarche is situated within the crosscurrents of her father’s own public emasculation amidst President Julius Nyerere’s steady nationalization and Africanization of the Tanzanian economy, his feeble attempts to reassert himself domestically by bullying their African houseboy, and through his private fantasies that free him to violate an African woman. The year after Nyerere was elected as the first President of newly independent Tanganyika, an African politician in neighboring Uganda responding to a journalist’s question regarding Indian girls being sent to India to find husbands said, “If people are citizens here they should be able to find husbands in this country” (September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1963). In a single sentence, the body of the Indian woman and access to her becomes a definitional feature of citizenship for the diasporic Indian in East Africa. As scholars of both nation and gender have articulated time and again, women, to their detriment, are repeatedly constructed as both the bearers and boundary-markers of culture. This condition is exacerbated for diasporic subjects. The miles away from their point of origin as well as their numerical minority induces a heightened attention to preserving the purity of that community. And in her tongue-in-cheek *The Feast of Nine Virgins* (2001), Jameela Siddiqui captures precisely that insistence upon safeguarding the bodies of Indian girls especially once menstruation can potentially make visible any indiscretion with an African man. “Our good Indian girls might find themselves reduced to running off with Black men. That was every Indian father’s worst nightmare. Daughters had to be married off as soon as possible. Once a daughter was menstruating, every drop of her menstrual blood descended on her father’s neck like the blade of a guillotine” (13). Like Ladha’s protagonist who begins to

menstruate during one of her father's fraught nightmares, once again the body of the Indian girl-woman is central to the way in which the Indian male negotiates the East African political landscape.

The earliest depiction of an interracial relationship between an African man and an Indian woman takes place in Malawian author David Rubadiri's *No Bride Price* (1967). When Lombe, a high-ranking civil servant in the Ministry of Labor, meets Sandra for the first time, she arouses a host of affective responses in him. Having never spoken to an Indian woman before, he is simultaneously ill at ease in her presence and intrigued by her. However, the omniscient narration of his attraction to her reveals that it is not so much Sandra who fascinates him but what Sandra represents. Rubadiri writes, "He did not see a woman in her. He saw some kind of inner light - a shaft of inward peace that he had never experienced before. This was the peephole into the shadow of Indians he had passed by every day of his life on the pavements of the city" (85). The deftness with which Sandra the woman is transmuted into a seemingly spiritual experience and then transmogrified into a peephole is striking. Here, Lombe's desire for her is quickly sanitized into a curiosity that is rechanneled towards the community she represents. Whatever eroticism remains in this encounter lies in his longing to catch a glimpse through the peephole that is Sandra of the Indians with whom he shares the city. What is particularly interesting is that Lombe is introduced to Sandra through her brother and his friend, Chaudry. Yet, at no point does Lombe see Chaudry as potentially giving him access or insight into the Indian community. Lombe only imagines an Indian woman to be the most authentic gateway. However, Sandra reveals herself to be far more than this.

Amidst a group of Indian men and African politicians discussing racial integration, she powerfully articulates that very particular anxiety surrounding interracial relationships between Indian women and African men. She says, “Indo-African children are entirely from Indian fathers and African mothers; that is the nearest it has come to, even after the man eaters of Tsavo and the sugar plantations of South Africa - even then the mothers of these products hardly knew or lived with the husband” (105). She perceptively identifies and articulates the acceptable permutations of interracial relationships in this geopolitical moment. Indian women like herself are off-limits to African men. The narrative both confirms this and performs this with the precision of a scalpel when the outspoken and independent Sandra is excised from the text without a word from her. Chaudry informs Lombe, “She has gone. Daddy sent her away...” (148). Here, her fate is managed and then conveyed to Lombe and the readers by the two Indian men in her life.

While Sandra is removed abruptly from Rubadiri’s text, her astute observation regarding acceptable configurations of interracial relationships between Indians and Africans resonates through much of East African literature. Consider, for example, one of the opening passages of Bahadur Tejani’s novel *Day After Tomorrow* (1971) that is set in Kampala, Uganda:

A child plays on the verandah. He is the child of a new civilization. He is fair and brown like an Indian: but he has the bright teeth of the African and his curly hair. He is the life that has been forged from the union of parents of different races. The mother is African: the father is Indian. The boy is four years old. But already he has stout thighs, beautifully rounded and full buttocks and a rich healthy brown body which makes him look like a young god. The rich brown shines through with the finished gloss of mahogany wood. The mixed blood of two races proudly announcing itself. (6)

One cannot help but laugh at Tejani's hyperbolic description of a child who represents all the promise of racial integration. He is imbued with both messianic and mythical qualities as his very conception is described to be a "forg[ing] as if he was wrought and perfected in a furnace. Tejani's child represents a utopia of "racial complementarity" in which black and brown cannot help but illuminate each other (Jones 37).

In the title story of Yasmin Ladha's collection, any narrative of "racial complementarity" crumbles when we are confronted with the child of an Indian woman and an East African man. Unlike Tejani's luminous child, the bi-racial Aisha is hardly seen as a clarion call for interracial relationships. Instead, her body serves as a warning to Indian households of what could happen should they falter in their surveillance of Indian girls. In the following interaction with Aisha, the bumbling Mr. Jeevan turns toxic when he reminds the little girl that her grandfather's foolhardy exuberance for a free Tanzania allowed both his household and his daughter to be penetrated by an African man.

'See, what happened to your mother, Aisha-Hope?' Mr. Jeevan says, coming over to my side, 'All these visits to African houses, wearing African clothes, as if only the Lion Bharmal family celebrates Uhuru-independence. Your grandfather had it coming when a Bantu leaked swollen seeds in his hot daughter and then ran off chapa-chapa, full of hyena glee. And still your Lion Grandfather doesn't have the shame to tuck his tail between his legs. (61)

While the conception of the child in *Day After Tomorrow* is elevated to dizzying heights, Aisha's is unequivocally animalistic. In Mr. Jeevan's eyes, Aisha's mother's sexual liaison with an African man transforms her regal father into a shameless dog. In a striking finale to the short story, Aisha disavows her mother. She responds to Mr. Jeevan, "It is my mother who wears a shamed tail. But We, Sir, are the Lion's Granddaughter"

(62). In doing so, she simultaneously disavows her African heritage by choosing to articulate her lineage through her grandfather. Even Menezes Vassanji's critically-acclaimed *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), one of the only texts that depicts a sustained and consensual relationship between an Indian woman and an East African man still dooms it to failure. First, Deepa's mother engineers her marriage to a suitable Indian candidate. And when Deepa and her African lover, Njoroge persist in meeting in her husband's shop, Njoroge's political enemies murder him by obtaining the keys to the shop from her husband. Here, both the public patriarchy of the Kenyan nation-state and the domestic patriarchy of the diasporic Indian household collude to end the relationship between an Indian woman and an East African man. Indeed, Vassanji's novel ends by reinscribing the acceptable configuration of interracial relationships when Deepa's father shyly confesses to living with an African woman now that his wife is dead.

My hope is that by beginning to trace these fictive depictions of interracial relationships between diasporic Indian women and East African men, we can attempt to reorient the scholarly lens through which interracial relationships in postcolonial nation-states are typically filtered. In doing so, we might as Gaurav Desai says, "shift the traditional Manichean focus on European colonizers and the African colonized to a third element - the Asian, and to a consideration of Africa's engagement with Asia and Asian engagement with the African continent" (vi).

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